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Former President Clinton Fills the Bill for High-Stakes Trip to North Korea

Former President Bill Clinton is on a high-stakes mission to secure the release of two American journalists held in North Korea.

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Securing his status as an international handshake-for-hire, former President Bill Clinton flew to North Korea Tuesday on a high-stakes diplomatic mission to negotiate the release of two jailed American journalists.

It's unclear how involved the White House was in Clinton's trip. But one thing was certain: Clinton's wife -- Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who has been the face of the administration's efforts to bring North Korea back to the table over its nuclear program -- was not there. The secretary was in Africa on a seven-nation tour.

So ... why Bill?

Political analysts say the former president offers something the North Koreans crave -- status and bragging rights. His visit could be considered ransom by itself. Plus Hillary Clinton and Pyongyang aren't exactly simpatico these days, after she and the North Koreans got in a lowbrow war of words during her trip to Asia last month.

"Let's face it. He is a rock star of sorts. And they probably get the most sort of payback, or payoff if you will, from having a visit from him as opposed to the other candidates," said Jim Walsh, a research associate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who studies international security.

The former president, who met with leader Kim Jong Il, appears to have been the first choice for the job over several other potential one-shot envoys.

Aside from the secretary of state, other logical choices included former U.N. Ambassador Bill Richardson, who has traveled to the country on similar missions previously; former President Jimmy Carter, who made a tension-defusing visit in 1994; and former Vice President Al Gore, who co-founded the Current TV channel the jailed journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, worked for.

Walsh said he thought Richardson would be tapped to go, but he noted the bad blood between Richardson and the Clintons following Richardson's endorsement of Barack Obama during last year's Democratic presidential primaries.

Robert Hathaway, director of the Asia Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, said Carter is probably one of the only other people who could have made the trip, recalling that he played an "invaluable role" under the Clinton administration despite White House anxiety over that trip at the time.

But when it comes to international cachet, Bill Clinton has the goods. Hathaway said the North Koreans would place an "extraordinary value" on his visit.

As for Hillary Clinton, Hathaway said: "It's certainly a good guess to surmise that she might not have been in the best position to carry out this mission successfully at this point."

During the secretary of state's trip to Asia last month, she touched off a strangely personal spat with the North Koreans after she compared them to "unruly children" demanding attention.

In response, North Korea's foreign ministry called Clinton a "funny lady" who sometimes "looks like a primary schoolgirl and sometimes a pensioner going shopping." The ministry was quoted as calling her remarks "vulgar" and saying "she is by no means intelligent."

The State Department returned fire, saying North Korea's path of isolation will doom the country to a "dismal future."

Doug Bandow, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said it might be too soon for the secretary of state to show her face before the North Koreans.

"You can eat crow a few months down the line, but trying to eat crow a month or two after, that's a little too recent," Bandow said.

More importantly, Bandow said the Obama administration surely did not want to make the visit an official one by sending its top diplomat.

"I think it's probably a smart way to do it," he said, since Bill Clinton is not a member of the administration, yet he carries stature that is virtually unsurpassed on the world stage.

Though it might appear that the secretary of state is once again on the sidelines -- after grappling with such chatter as she tended to a broken elbow stateside in June and July -- White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs repeated what Clinton herself said last month. She's still part of the team.

Gibbs said Clinton, who landed Tuesday in Kenya, is busier than ever, pointing to her international travel schedule as he tried to debunk a similar narrative coming out about White House counsel Greg Craig. An article in The Wall Street Journal said Craig's job was at stake, which Gibbs denied.

Gibbs also denied reports in North and South Korean media that Bill Clinton had passed on a message from Obama to Kim Jong Il.

"That's not true," Gibbs said. He refused to speak in detail about the mission, citing the sensitivity of the trip.

"I think we're obviously talking about something that's extremely sensitive," he said. "We will have more to say on this hopefully later on."

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Analysts, though, said Clinton must have made the trip in coordination with the White House. And they said it's highly unlikely that he went to North Korea without some assurance that he would be able to win the release of the Americans.

"President Clinton is a careful politician, even if he's retired, and he's not going to set himself up for failure. So he would have wanted assurances in advance," Walsh said. "It may not be a guaranteed absolutely done deal, but this was close enough that he felt confident to go."

Not only could Clinton secure the release of the journalists, but his meeting with Kim, who is reportedly ailing and setting up his own succession, could eventually provide the opening for North Korea to return to its long-empty seat at the negotiating table over its nuclear program.

Bandow called the visit a "preliminary step" in moving forward the broader negotiations.

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