

Clinton's N. Korea visit opened more than one door

As well as securing the release of two Americans, the former president's trip may open an opportunity for further constructive dialogue with the Hermit Kingdom.

By Han S. Park, August 26, 2009

I had gone to Pyongyang for other reasons. But I was also hopeful, in early July of this year, that I could be of some assistance to Laura Ling and Euna Lee, the two American journalists then being held by North Korea.

I quickly realized that they were beyond the help of my contacts in a variety of government departments. The situation had become extremely politicized, a matter of national prestige. The North Koreans were furious with

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's declaration that the charges were "baseless," and they were preparing to send the journalists to a hard-labor prison camp. The journalists would be released only if North Korea's head of state, Kim Jong Il, chose to issue an official pardon or amnesty. The problem was that no one in North Korea dared recommend such amnesty for fear of political repercussions. That's where former

President Clinton came in. The Obama administration was in a tough bind. Of course it wanted to secure the release of American citizens. But with the North Koreans conducting missile tests and refusing to curb their nuclear ambitions, it was not the time for the president or another top administration official to visit Pyongyang to beg for mercy. On the other hand, it was imperative that the U.S. send someone who would be received personally by Kim Jong Il, because he was the only person who could grant the journalists' release.

We all know what happened next. Clinton arrived in Pyongyang, he met with Kim Jong Il, the women were released, and a day later they were reunited with their anxious families in Los Angeles. That alone would have been a huge victory.

But the importance of Clinton's trip goes far beyond the release of the two Americans. U.S. relations with North Korea were at an impasse when he embarked on his mission. Constructive diplomacy had all but ceased as the Obama administration, reacting to what it saw as defiance from North Korea, began talking of additional sanctions and punishments. And based on the last two decades of U.S.-North Korea relations, we had little reason to believe such punitive actions would lead to improvements. Although North Korea probably would have become more impoverished, it certainly also would have become more defiant. There would have been no solution to such a political impasse.

On the other hand, as North Korea experts know, the country has long wanted to improve relations with Washington. There has been speculation in conservative circles since Clinton's return that the former president gave in to Kim Jong Il's bullying; that the rescue mission "rewarded bad behavior." This was not so. Yes, Clinton apologized for the journalists crossing the border illegally and committing "hostile acts" by filming human trafficking on the border, but I have been assured that the North Koreans neither requested or received any other "rewards" or "compensation."

During the course of my recent visit, I was told by senior North Korean officials that they were mindful of the potential harm to their image that would have resulted from any appearance of demanding a ransom for the release of the women. In fact, they were extremely sensitive to possible adverse ramifications in the court of world public opinion. All of my sources and contacts in North Korea have attested to this, insisting that the North Koreans did not demand nor receive concessions from Clinton during his visit.

So what then, beyond the journalists' release, did the visit accomplish? It broke the ice.

Clinton's actions have opened the door to possible bilateral negotiations. Now both sides need to walk through the door. North Koreans seem to be amenable to a multilateral approach, such as the "six-party talks," as long as a legitimate bilateral forum is activated first. Talks in recent days between North Korea and South Korea also seem a positive sign.

Continuing former President George W. Bush's policy of treating North Korea as an "evil" regime and denying it the opportunity to sit across the table would be counterproductive and potentially disastrous. Now that a back channel has been opened courtesy of Clinton, the Obama administration should open a direct channel of negotiation with Pyongyang. Once that happens, I suspect North Korea will drop its objections to multilateral forums.

If Clinton's visit to North Korea and his successful efforts to secure the release of the American citizens contributed to opening up a constructive dialogue for peace in the region, the suffering of Laura Ling, Euna Lee and their families will not have been in vain. For this, we all owe them a great debt.

Now we must ensure that their sacrifices will be remembered as breaking an impasse in U.S.-North Korean relations -- as the wedge that finally created an opening to bring peace and stability in the region and beyond.

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