

# WebMemo



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## Bill Clinton in Pyongyang: Bring American Reporters Home, Do Not Let Up on Nukes

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This morning, former President William J. Clinton arrived in North Korea on a surprise mission to obtain the release of two jailed U.S. reporters. It is likely that Clinton's trip will serve as the catalyst for Pyongyang to release the journalists, the culmination of months of quiet bilateral diplomacy. Recent U.S. statements indirectly admitting the guilt of the reporters and sending a senior-level envoy are consistent with previous U.S. actions that led Pyongyang to release American citizens who had illegally entered into North Korea.

While gaining the freedom of the two journalists would be a welcome development, Clinton's mission risks undermining ongoing international efforts to pressure North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons. The Obama Administration should have instead insisted on resolving the issue through existing diplomatic channels, including special envoy Ambassador Stephen Bosworth.

**Freelance Diplomacy.** Clinton may be tempted to freelance U.S. diplomacy, negotiating his own vision of a nuclear agreement with North Korea, as former President Jimmy Carter disastrously did in 1994. Even if Clinton focuses solely on gaining the release of the journalists, China and Russia would seize upon any perceived diplomatic "break-through" with North Korea as justification for rescinding sanctions imposed against Pyongyang for repeatedly violating U.N. resolutions.

Abandoning these punitive measures prior to North Korea taking meaningful steps to comply with U.N. resolutions would mark a dangerous

weakening of international resolve to secure complete North Korean denuclearization. The Obama Administration must ensure that former President Clinton remains constrained by narrowly defined negotiating parameters and insist that the issues of the two U.S. journalists and North Korean compliance with U.N. resolutions be seen as clearly separate issues.

**Progress on Attaining Reporters' Release.** Last month, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton subtly altered the Obama Administration's position toward the jailed reporters. Previously, Washington had demanded their release on humanitarian grounds, dismissing the charges against the reporters as baseless. Following the reporters' public admission of guilt in mid-July, Secretary Clinton requested North Korea provide them amnesty, thus acknowledging wrongdoing. She emphasized that the two reporters had expressed "great remorse for the incident" and that "everyone is very sorry that it happened." U.S. diplomatic sources privately confirmed that Secretary Clinton's comments were meant as a signal to Pyongyang.

The contrite U.S. statements, coupled with the prestige of sending a former President as an envoy,

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might provide Pyongyang with sufficient reason to release the reporters. Both the U.S. and North Korea have maintained a low-key response to the arrest of the journalists and neither government linked their fate to the nuclear issue. North Korea announced the reporters had not yet been sent to a prison to serve their 12-year sentence of hard labor but instead were residing in a guesthouse.

In both 1994 and 1996, North Korea arrested U.S. citizens who had strayed into North Korea. In both instances, a form of U.S. apology and the dispatch of then-Congressman Bill Richardson as presidential envoy caused North Korea to release the Americans.

**Sending a Signal, Intended or Not.** The presence of Bill Clinton is rife with symbolism and will be parsed for suggestions of a change in policy by both North Korea and the Obama Administration. At the tail end of his presidency, Clinton was on the verge of agreeing to travel to Pyongyang for a summit meeting with Kim Jong-il to sign an agreement constricting North Korea's missile programs. Pyongyang's failure to make progress in preparatory meetings with U.S. officials doomed the potential summit.

Clinton was greeted at the airport by Kim Kye-kwan, North Korea's chief nuclear negotiator, generating speculation that Pyongyang seeks to use his visit as a springboard to establishing bilateral dialogue with the Obama Administration. North Korea has abandoned the six-party talks but indicated it is amenable to discussing its nuclear weapons programs bilaterally with Washington.

North Korea's agreement to receive Clinton will be misinterpreted as a signal that Pyongyang is now willing to resume nuclear negotiations, perhaps because it feels sufficiently comfortable on establishing its leadership succession plans. Pyongyang will continue to insist, however, on preconditions unacceptable to the U.S., such as first being accepted as a nuclear weapons state and Washington reducing its military posture toward the regime.

The Obama Administration's acquiescence to sending Bill Clinton, when it had reportedly rejected requests from Bill Richardson and former Vice President Al Gore, will raise speculation over possible policy reversals on this and other North Korean issues. Will the Obama Administration accept less than it previously insisted upon in order to make progress with North Korea? U.S. allies South Korea and Japan remain exceedingly nervous that Obama will eventually abandon the U.S. policy of denuclearizing North Korea and accept a lower standard of merely preventing future nuclear proliferation.

**U.S. Should Remain Resolute on Full Compliance.** Clinton's visit has roiled the North Korean policy waters beyond their already tumultuous state. There are great uncertainties over North Korean and U.S. intentions, escalating the risk of miscalculation, confrontation, and crisis.

The Obama Administration should make it clear that while freeing the U.S. journalists removes a potential friction point between the U.S. and North Korea, it does not serve as a substitute for Pyongyang's full compliance with U.N. Resolutions 1874 and 1718. Washington should continue to insist that North Korea express its clear commitment to abide by all of its previous six-party talks pledges to completely and verifiably abandon its nuclear weapons programs.

Until North Korea does so, Washington should continue to press the United Nations member states to fully implement the counter-proliferation and financial sanctions required under U.N. resolutions. Pressuring North Korea, while concurrently holding open the potential for the regime to receive significant benefits if it abandons its nuclear weapons, offers the most viable potential for resolving the North Korean nuclear problem.

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