

The Scouting Report: Dialing Down North Korea's Nuclear Threat

Former President Bill Clinton traveled to Pyongyang for a surprise meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il on Tuesday, resulting in the issuing of a “special pardon” for the American reporters Euna Lee and Laura Ling detained in March. This visit came at a tense time following North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile tests in the past months, violations of U.N. Security Council resolutions, and the boycotting of six-party talks. The Korean Central News Agency reported that the release of Laura Ling and Euna Lee was a sign of North Korea’s “humanitarian and peaceloving policy.”

Brookings expert and Director of the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies Richard Bush, whose two-decade public service career spans Congress, the intelligence community and the U.S. State Department, and Senior Politico Editor Fred Barbash took your questions on the North Korea problem in this week’s edition of the Scouting Report.

The transcript of this web chat follows.

Fred Barbash-Moderator: Richard Bush’s two-decade public service career spans Congress, the intelligence community and the U.S. State Department. He currently focuses on China-Taiwan relations, U.S.-China relations, the Korean peninsula and Japan’s security. He is the author of, among other works, *A War Like No Other: The Truth About China's Challenge to America*, *Untying the Knot: Making Peace in the Taiwan Strait*, and *At Cross Purposes: U.S.-Taiwan Relations Since 1942*.

Welcome readers and welcome Richard. This couldn't come at a more opportune moment. So let's get started.

12:30 [Comment From Ramon (Detroit)] Don't get me wrong, this is a wonderful moment and I applaud President Clinton's efforts. However, to play Devil's Advocate, didn't Kim Jong Il get exactly what he wanted? He didn't get some second tier diplomat; he got President Clinton, a world stage and another propaganda victory. By sending President Clinton to negotiate the release of the two journalists, doesn't this once again legitimize a dishonest regime and give Pyongyang the ability to act like the good guy in world public opinion by releasing people they shouldn't have seized in the first place? Also, what message does this send to other rogue nations such as Iran?

12:31 Richard Bush: Thanks, Fred. It's good to be with you.

On Ramon's question, it's true that the fact it was Clinton was a symbolic gain for Kim. It may help him domestically, in imposing his preferred succession arrangement. The important thing, however, was that Clinton, as far as we know, kept the release of the journalists separate from the "big issues," like the nuclear issue. Kim wasn't able to use the women as leverage.

12:32 [Comment From Erin] Do you think DPRK's "special pardon" issued for the two American journalists has implications on other aspects of US – North Korea relations?

12:32 Richard Bush: North Korea no doubt hoped that it could use the pardon as leverage to extract concessions from the Obama Administration on the nuclear and other issues. It probably hopes that to do so in the future. Based on the information currently available, however, the Administration was able to keep the issue of Ms. Ling's and Ms. Lee's incarceration separate from any other issue.

12:32 [Comment From Jason] Why did the US send Bill Clinton, rather than a current government official to negotiate on behalf of Laura Ling and Euna Lee?

12:33 Richard Bush: The US suggested others to the North Koreans: Bill Richardson, governor of New Mexico and former Vice President Gore, for example. Pyongyang was not interested. Recently, North Korea indicated that Mr. Clinton would be acceptable.

12:33 [Comment From Gary] Do you think it's realistic that North Korea will abandon its nuclear weapons program in the future?

12:33 Richard Bush: In my view, the chances for the foreseeable future are close to zero. North Korea believes that overwhelming American power renders it profoundly insecure. It has nowhere to turn for defense support that is credible. Moreover, it appears that Kim Jong Il, who is in ailing health, wishes to ensure a smooth transition to his son and to leave the DPRK stronger when he is gone. The best hope for a change in North Korean policy will likely occur when a new leadership consolidates its position and assesses the cost and benefits of Kim's approach.

12:33 [Comment From Sungwon Yang] Is there a possibility that China or US could retreat their firm position on sanction toward North Korea because of Clinton's visit?

12:35 Richard Bush: I doubt it. Washington was certainly clear that the visit was for one specific purpose. I hope Beijing understands that. Only if KJI revealed to Clinton a major reversal in NK policy would it have implications for sanctions.

12:35 [Comment From Sungwon Yang] Mr. Kim Jong-il looks fairly healthy in the photo with Mr. Clinton. How do you assess the possibility of North Korea's contingency situation because of sudden change of its leadership?

12:37 Richard Bush: In my view, a "contingency situation" or collapse is likely after Kim Jong Il's passing, it is still possible (20% perhaps). No-one can predict the dynamic that will ensue when Kim dies. But elements of the regime might end up fighting with each other, leading to collapse.

12:37 [Comment From Daniel Lippman] Does the dictatorship's actions help their people's self interest in supplying ample food, water, clothing, shelter and fuel for every North Korean citizen?

12:38 Richard Bush: The regime's actions don't help at all in these areas. And international financial sanctions may make it harder for NK to do business with foreign customers.

12:38 [Comment From Daniel Lippman] Does the regime have any internal support (besides among the elites)? And why does North Korea spew bizarre anti-American rhetoric; while it may have worked right after the Korean War, doesn't their populace understand that their regime is illegitimate?

12:38 Richard Bush: Frankly, we don't have a good feel for this. But it appears that the public is realistic (but resigned) about the regime it must endure. The regime engages in anti-American rhetoric because being the victim of American imperialism is part of the national identity.

12:38 [Comment From F. Peter Boer] Is there a consensus that the second test was nuclear or a fake test using conventional explosives? I understand no radioactive gas products have been detected.

12:39 Richard Bush: It's my information that this was a real nuclear test.

12:39 [Comment From Alex Benedetto] It appears that involving International support and pressure is part of the US position towards N. Korea. How do you see US policy with North Korea shaping up, and the extent to which it is being driven by external events?

12:40 Richard Bush: The Obama Administration had to respond to NK provocations from Day 1. But the response, in my view, has been sound. It is realistic about NK intentions, firm in its response, understands that we must be patient to get a change in NK policy, and recognizes the need to work with others.

12:40 [Comment From Alex Benedetto] What do you think it would take for N. Korea to make a permanent agreement with the US and other nations on dismantling their nuclear program and agreeing with IAEA inspections?

12:41 Richard Bush: A fundamental shift in approach to how to guarantee the country's security, away from a reliance on nuclear weapons.

12:41 [Comment From Chris Ajemian] My questions are do the recent connections with Syria and Burma set up a pattern that justify real sanctions for North Korea such as a tightly enforced naval blockade? And, is stronger cooperation with China the sole barrier to proceeding on this front?

12:43 Richard Bush: Hi Chris!

This story is still developing and I don't have any inside information. It certainly confirms a negative view of NK intentions, which should cause China to continue and toughen its relatively firm stance. A multilateral naval blockade is one means of stopping this.

12:43 [Comment From Derwood, MD] What are the prospects for Korean unification in the next 20 years? Is there a US government policy or preference on the unification question?

12:44 Richard Bush: US policy favors unification of the peninsula under the aegis of the ROK. If pushed to make a prediction, I would say that will happen within 20 years.

12:44 [Comment From Derwood, MD] Why should we avoid negotiating directly, one-on-one, with North Korea about the nuclear issue? Do the other members of the six-party talks add any hope for solution?

12:45 Richard Bush: We are willing to talk with NK one-on-one, if it is part of the six-party process. The latter is needed because this is a multilateral problem. Another problem with direct negotiations is that NK's premise now is that we accept them as a nuclear power. The Administration won't do that.

12:46 [Comment From Tom Swarthout] What role, if any, did China play in the negotiations for the release of the two reporters?

12:46 Richard Bush: No idea. It's probably happy that Clinton made the trip.

12:46 [Comment From Doug] In your estimation, when will the six country talks with North Korea resume?

12:47 Richard Bush: No idea. NK will have to make a credible reaffirmation of the goal of the 6PT -- full and verifiable denuclearization.

12:47 [Comment From Shawn] Is regime collapse a realistic concern in the near future?

12:47 Richard Bush: Although it may not be likely, it is still possible. No-one can predict the dynamic that will ensue after Kim Jong Il's passing. Elements of the regime might end up fighting with each other, leading to collapse.

12:47 [Comment From Laurie] How legitimate of a fear is it that North Korea will transfer nuclear technology to other hostile nations?

12:48 Richard Bush: There is a real fear. North Korea most likely transferred nuclear technology and knowhow to Syria. As far as I know, it has not transferred fissile material (the stuff that makes a nuclear weapon so powerful) or weapons themselves.

12:48 [Comment From Adrianna] What does North Korea's nuclear weapons development mean for security in East Asia?

12:48 Richard Bush: Pyongyang's pursuit of a nuclear deterrent leaves South Korea and Japan more insecure, and United States has a treaty commitment to come to their defense. China has some concern that if North Korea continues to expand its nuclear arsenal, Japan and South Korea may go nuclear, which then makes China more insecure. Also there is the danger that a North Korea with nuclear weapons would be more reckless in its behavior, increasing the chances of a conflict occurring because of miscalculation.

12:48 [Comment From David P Lazar (DC)] How significant is the nuclear threat to this nation? what would be a likely response from our government if a eastern nation (South Korea for example) was attacked?

12:49 Richard Bush: NK has yet to perfect its long-range missiles (or the nuclear device for that matter). The threat to SK and Japan is greater. Our commitment to come to their defense, with nuclear weapons if necessary, is an important deterrent to reckless NK actions.

12:49 [Comment From Michael] Do you think all the speculation that hardliners have been gaining influence in the DPRK's domestic politics has been overblown?

12:50 Richard Bush: Frankly, we don't know. But there are reports that the hardliners are gaining. NK's testing suggests that. And hardliners are usually in charge in a political transition.

12:51 [Comment From Alex Benedetto] Will the recent release of the two American journalists reset the relationship between North Korea and the United States?

12:52 Richard Bush: I seriously doubt it. The gap between us on fundamentals (NK's nuclear weapons) remains wide. The visit may help communication, but that hasn't been the real problem.

12:52 [Comment From Alex Benedetto] Will North Korea now have a new perspective on the six party talks (after the release/pardon of the American journalists)?

12:52 Richard Bush: I doubt it. Their preference now appears to be direct negotiations only with the US (which is unacceptable to the Administration). What NK says about the 6PT in the next few weeks will be significant.

12:53 [Comment From Daniel Lippman] And how much do average NKoreans know about the Western developed world? Is there Internet or Satellite television so NKoreans can get news from CNN or the BBC?

12:54 Richard Bush: Not too much. The news sources you mention are available to some of the elite only. The availability of cell phones and radios is giving the public something of a better idea, e.g. that their SK cousins live much better than they do.

12:54 [Comment From Janaina] Do you think that the release of the two journalists can be the first step for North Korea coming back to negotiations?

12:55 Richard Bush: Only if NK has decided to reverse its long-term policy on nuclear weapons (which I think is unlikely for now).

12:55 [Comment From Adam] Does the U.S. handling of DPRK's nuclear program have a discernible impact on how Iran moves forward?

12:56 Richard Bush: Good question, although NK and Iran are in different stages of nuclear development. Pyongyang and Tehran each watch how Washington deals with the other.

12:56 [Comment From Sean Sullivan (NHK)] The US has repeatedly stated that proliferation is their chief concern when it comes to NK's nuclear program, and Sec Clinton on her recent trip to Asia, cited concerns over Burma's military relationship with NK. Which actors, state or otherwise is/should the US be most concerned about when it comes to NK spreading their technology?

12:56 Richard Bush: Countries in the greater Middle East, especially sponsors of terrorism, plus major terrorist organizations.

12:57 [Comment From Jae Hee Suh] How much attention did the delegates pay to Kim Jong-il's health? Was this an opportunity to find out more about his current condition?

12:58 Richard Bush: I don't know, but I'm sure they observed him very, very closely. This was a great opportunity to judge his longevity.

12:58 [Comment From Mike Salamon] Do you believe that the DPRK regime's goal of acquiring nuclear weapons is more motivated by maintaining their grip on power through a show of strength (domestic reasons) or by a desire to be seen as a more important player in world politics (foreign policy reasons)?

12:58 Richard Bush: I think it's both, but it's also a way of dealing with an unfriendly security environment. Nuclear weapons are the poor country's way of reducing vulnerability.

12:59 [Comment From Bethesda] I have not read any indication that our allies in northeast Asia and the six party talks - South Korea and Japan - were consulted or informed before Pres. Clinton's trip. Citizens of both countries are held by North Korea. Do you know if there was any consultation, or if there has been any response from these allies?

1:00 Richard Bush: I don't know whether the two countries were consulted. Normally Washington is very careful about keeping Tokyo and Seoul informed, but this is an exceptional case. I'm sure they will be fully briefed now.

1:00 [Comment From Kenneth (Chicago)] Have you ever been to North Korea? If so, what sticks out in your head about daily life there?

1:01 Richard Bush: I haven't been to North Korea. What I have read about daily life is that it's pretty terrible for most of NK's citizens.

1:03 Richard Bush: Human rights abuses in NK are a serious concern, one of many for US policy. It and the nuclear issue are important. Improvement in human rights will probably come with NK agrees to some degree of political and economic reform, or when the regime changes. That depends on dynamics within NK.

1:03 [Comment From shane] What are the NK leadership's benefits because of the Clinton's visit? Do you think this can be the breakthrough for US-DPRK nuclear negotiation?

1:04 Richard Bush: I'm sure KJI is pleased that Bill Clinton came to NK. It will help him politically within the elite. It may help the regime vis-a-vis the public. But I suspect that these benefits are fleeting.

1:05 [Comment From Massachusetts Avenue] Although our two citizens have been released, thousands of North Korean citizens are imprisoned under brutal conditions. What role should this and other human rights issues play in our approach to North Korea? Objectively, is it more important than the nuclear question?

1:05 Richard Bush: Human rights abuses in NK are a serious concern, one of many for US policy. It and the nuclear issue are important. Improvement in human rights will probably come with NK agrees to some degree of political and economic reform, or when the regime changes. That depends on dynamics within NK.

1:06 [Comment From Chris Ajemian] Are there any legitimate offers on the table from NK right now?

1:07 Richard Bush: As of last week, it is willing to have a new kind of dialogue, solely with the United States, and to discuss disarmament, not its denuclearization. The implication is that it believes our defense capabilities in East Asia should be on the table. All of this is unacceptable to the US.

1:07 [Comment From David P Lazar (DC)] Do you think that the Obama administration could have acted differently? Was this the best course of action?

1:09 Richard Bush: It could have overreacted to NK provocations since January. It could have capitulated to NK demands and "bought the same horse" yet again. It could have ignored the other concerned countries and fashioned a unilateral response. It did none of those, which was just right.

1:09 [Comment From Ethan] I think I read somewhere that KJI wanted to be a movie producer. Did he ever get in to that?

1:10 Richard Bush: He was involved (dominated) the production of many movies. Whether any will be classics is another matter.

1:10 [Comment From Elaine Grossman] May I ask you say a bit more about the basis for your understanding that the recent North Korean test explosion was a bona fide nuclear test and not a sizable conventional explosion instead? Please elaborate on any doubts you have about the scientific questions being raised in the West.

1:11 Richard Bush: Not too much more. My statement was based on information from people who had a basis for knowing and in whom I have confidence. Moreover, I do not believe the Chinese would have responded relatively strongly, as they did, if there was any doubt.

1:11 [Comment From Elaine Grossman] What is your understanding of the amount and type of nuclear weapons development assistance that North Korea has provided to Myanmar?

1:12 Richard Bush: Don't know. I just have seen a couple of articles in the Australian press.

1:12 [Comment From shane] What could be Mr. Clinton's visit's impact on NK succession process?

1:13 Richard Bush: Hard to say. It may strengthen KJI's ability to impose his preferred solution - designate his third son [28 years old] as his nominal replacement but rely on a group of senior leaders to run the country while his son gains experience.

1:13 [Comment From Massachusetts Avenue] Are China and Russia serious about enforcing UN sanctions on North Korea? Are these sanctions even a good way to get NK to do what we want?

1:15 Richard Bush: Media reports indicate that China is enforcing sanctions more than it ever has. The sanctions are useful in ensuring NK understands that it pays a price for its actions. Financial sanctions may reduce its foreign exchange earnings, which would not be a trivial effect. Sanctions tend to work over a long period, and the most likely point NK would change policy is after the KJI succession.

1:16 [Comment From Toru Takei] What did US gain from Clinton's visit other than the return of the two journalists?

1:17 Richard Bush: Recognition that it is not recalcitrant when goals are clear and achievable. Also, we blocked KJI from using the journalists as leverage on the issues that really count.

1:17 [Comment From Kenneth] What does Sec. of State Clinton bring to the table in terms of U.S.-NK relations?

1:18 Richard Bush: The strong support of President Obama, a good staff, and ability to articulate the US position, and her husband as special envoy when needed.

1:18 [Comment From Silversprings] What is the likelihood that NK will try to start a war? Does KJI's health somewhat a factor?

1:19 Richard Bush: Pretty low. The danger lies in a conflict that occurs because of miscalculation. But it's still low. Deterrence has worked. One way the succession is related is whether NK's new leaders will have the same respect for US power that KJI and his father had. On that, we have no idea.

1:20 [Comment From Massachusetts Avenue] The Bush administration took a mostly unyielding approach to North Korea, and NK tested a nuclear weapon. The Obama administration has presented a softer side, but again NK tested a nuclear weapon. Is there anything we can do short of military attack?

1:21 Richard Bush: Ensure that NK pays some price for these provocations; play for the critical moment when the new leadership takes power and assesses the effectiveness of KJI's policies; and, if they choose to continue that policy, work with other countries on a containment strategy.

1:22 [Comment From Ethan] Do you think Alaska or Hawaii have anything to worry about? Should they be practicing duck and cover maneuvers?

1:23 Richard Bush: For Ethan, Alaska and Hawaii don't have anything to worry about -- yet. Neither the long-range missile nor the nuclear device is proven. And the deterrent value of US retaliatory capabilities is very high.

1:23 [Comment From David P Lazar (DC)] What would the end of KJI's regime look like? If there was an explosion of opposition to whomever his successor is, does that mean civil war? what role would US/SK play?

1:24 Richard Bush: We have no idea. It could be a continuation of the present. The regime could collapse. It could be something in between. Even if collapse is not that likely, the US and others need to prepare because its consequences are so huge.

1:25 [Comment From Dupont Circle] The regimes in both China and Vietnam have retained control (and maybe even become more legitimate) despite economic liberalization - why is NK reluctant to follow that model.

1:26 Richard Bush: Good question. We don't know. Perhaps the regime is afraid of the more open and pluralistic type of system that has emerged in both China and VN.

1:26 [Comment From Washington] What about the Chinese? Don't they have leverage over North Korea? Why aren't they using it? Is a nuclear North Korea in China's interest in some way?

1:27 Richard Bush: As a neighbor of North Korea, China has worried that sanctions that are too tough might lead to collapse, which might spill over into Northeast China, causing instability. It also wishes to retain what limited leverage it has. But it has worked to enforce these sanctions more than previous ones.

1:29 [Comment From Kenneth] Why would KJI's third son take over? I thought the laws of primogeniture dictated it should be the first?

1:29 Richard Bush: The law of primogeniture doesn't apply to dictators. KJI does what he wants.

1:29 [Comment From Mike Salamon] Do you think the fact that NK's chief nuclear negotiator met Pres. Clinton at the airport upon his arrival signifies that nuclear issues were discussed during the visit, or at least that the NK government wanted them to be discussed?

1:29 Richard Bush: NK wanted it to appear that nuclear issues were discussed.

1:30 Fred Barbash-Moderator: That's it folks. Thanks to our readers and their smart questions. And thanks to Richard and Brookings for another exceedingly timely and informative conversation. We'll be back next week, same time, same place.