

## Testimony of Donald P. Gregg before the Committee on Foreign Relations of the U.S. Senate

There is a "perfect storm" brewing near the Korean Peninsula – it is not a typhoon but a political-military upheaval that is threatening to turn a 50-year-old relationship with South Korea on its head, and to bring about a radical change in the balance of military power in the region through North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons.

In South Korea, where a presidential election was held in late December 2002, the candidacy of Roh Moo Hyun was supported decisively by younger voters who clearly showed that their top priority was the improvement of relations with North Korea, not the maintenance of long-standing ties to the U.S., which over the past several years have seemed to grow stale. The over-fifty set who preponderantly voted for Lee Hoi Chang are deeply upset by his defeat in this pivotal election, but the broad outlines of the policies enunciated by the president-elect are unlikely to be reversed.

I have never met president-elect Roh, but from what I hear he has a natural instinct for politics that makes him acutely sensitive to the changing dynamic on the Korean Peninsula. He is already positioning himself to be taken seriously when he makes his first trip to the United States following his inauguration later this month, and I feel confident that the Bush administration understands the importance of this visit and will treat him with all due courtesy. At the same time, there is no gainsaying the fact that there are significant underlying differences in perspective and strategy related to North Korea policy between the Bush administration and the incoming Roh administration. These differences will not be easily bridged without a concerted effort by both sides to accommodate each other's views.

The challenge posed by North Korea is both very complex and highly dangerous. North Korea has always been a very difficult intelligence target, and our knowledge and understanding of the actions and motivations of its leaders are seriously deficient. What we do know is that they are deeply committed to their own world view and strongly resistant to the countervailing world views of outsiders – including those of their most immediate neighbors in the region. They also are notoriously tough negotiators who seem almost to relish taking a dangerous issue right to the brink.

I visited North Korea twice in 2002. My first visit took place in early April after I had written directly to Chairman Kim Jong Il, saying that in the wake of 9/11 the U.S. government's heightened concerns about North Korea's weapons of mass destruction needed to be discussed frankly to avoid the eruption of dangerous misunderstandings between Pyongyang and Washington. During that visit I had about ten hours of discussions with a vice minister of foreign affairs and a very tough three star general posted along the DMZ. In the course of those discussions, I formed a distinct impression that the general's world view was notably different from that of the vice minister, which raises at least the possibility of something less than a monolithic point of view among the leadership of North Korea.

The North Koreans were full of questions, mostly about President Bush. Why is he so different from his father? Why does he hate President Clinton? Why does he use such insulting rhetoric to describe our country and our leaders?

The general, in particular, was very cynical about the U.S. He showed little trust in dialogue, and was harsh in his criticism of our implementation of the 1994 Agreed Framework. Still, at the end of our meeting he thanked me for coming such a long way, and said our talks had been, in part, beneficial.

The vice minister bemoaned the lack of high-level talks with the U.S., such as had been held at the end of the Clinton administration. He expressed regret that President Clinton had not visited Pyongyang, asserting that a visit at that level would have solved many difficult issues. He said to me: "You and I cannot solve the problems between our countries. Talks have to be held at a much higher level."

Upon my return to Washington, I strongly recommended that a high-level envoy carrying a presidential letter be sent to Pyongyang to get a dialogue started. A Korean-speaking foreign service officer had accompanied me, and was most helpful in assuring that information from our visit was disseminated within the government.

Later, on October 3, I received a written invitation to return to Pyongyang. The invitation also indicated that the North Koreans had accepted my suggestion, made in April, that the USS Pueblo be returned as a good will gesture to the American people. The Pueblo was seized by the North Koreans in 1968, and had been converted into a sort of anti-American museum, moored along the bank of the Taedong River in Pyongyang.

From mid to late October, the U.S. government released information on Assistant Secretary of State Kelly's visit to Pyongyang that had taken place in early October. The visit had not gone well from the North Korean point of view as Kelly had confronted them about the development of a secret highly enriched uranium program using equipment acquired from Pakistan. I thought that this might mean that my visit would be cancelled, but it held firm and I went into Pyongyang in early November accompanied by the historian Don Oberdorfer, and Fred Carriere, vice president of The Korea Society, who is proficient in Korean.

Our opening meetings were with the same two officials. Both men were deeply chagrined that the Kelly visit had been little more than a confrontation, but seemed upbeat about the improvements in their relations with South Korea and Russia. The general spoke effusively about "cutting down fifty year old trees" in the DMZ to facilitate a restoration of North-South rail connections, and said he was developing amicable relations with his South Korean counterparts. The vice minister told me that the return of the Pueblo was "off the table." I went down to the river to see it. It had been moved. An old man who was exercising on the bank at the spot where the Pueblo had been moored told us that it had been moved to Nampo for "repairs."

In all of our conversations, we made the point that the highly enriched uranium program was a violation of several agreements North Korea had signed with both South Korea and the U.S. When we asked the general "when and why" the program had been started, he blandly responded: "I am not required to answer that kind of question."

In our meetings with the vice minister, we stressed the need for North Korea to stop its HEU program, which was of great concern to the U.S. and to all of North Korea's neighbors. We were told that "all of the U.S.'s nuclear concerns will be cleared if the U.S. agrees to sign a non-aggression pact, shows respect for our sovereignty and promises not to hinder our economic development."

Toward the end of our visit we also met with First Deputy Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju, who is probably Kim Jong Il's closest foreign policy advisor. Minister Kang said that Chairman Kim had referred positively to President Bush's statement in South Korea that the U.S. has no intention of attacking North Korea, and urged that the United States respond boldly to North Korea's requests as stipulated in our previous discussion with the vice minister.

Don Oberdorfer and I reported directly to the White House upon our arrival in the U.S. a few days later, after a brief stopover in Seoul. We urged that a positive dialogue with North Korea be started. In response, we were told only that initiating a dialogue would serve only to "reward bad behavior" on the part of the North Koreans. On November 15, the U.S. and its KEDO allies announced a cut-off of future oil shipments to North Korea. North Korea was quick to respond by evicting IAEA inspectors, shutting off surveillance cameras, announcing its withdrawal from the NPT and making a number of other moves suggesting that they may have decided to develop a nuclear weapons capacity – most notably, the recent indications of a possible movement of spent fuel rods from the containment pond at Yongbyon.

Why has this happened? I believe it is because the North Koreans take seriously the harsh rhetoric applied to them by many prominent Americans, including leading members of the Republican Party since the congressional elections of 1994 and the Bush administration since 2000. From their long association with Pakistani nuclear scientists and technicians, the North Koreans have most probably observed the sense of security that Pakistan derives from its nuclear weapons. In addition, the North Koreans appear to perceive President Bush as a tough and effective war leader, and probably assume that the Iraq war will be short, leaving North Korea next in line for military action.

Can this North Korean lunge for nuclear weapons be stopped? Some experts think it is too late. I am not quite so pessimistic. Less than ninety days ago, the North Koreans wanted to talk. Today we are in the bizarre position of saying "we're not going to attack you, but we won't negotiate with you." This gives North Korea no incentive to do anything but proceed to build a nuclear weapons capacity.

The "perfect storm" I mentioned at the beginning of this testimony may destroy the balance of power in Northeast Asia, or it may escalate rapidly to a point of real danger as it did in 1994. I still believe that it may be turned aside by the establishment of meaningful dialogue with North Korea. We'll never know what might have been avoided, unless we talk. In my view, it would be a miscalculation of unprecedented proportions if we failed to pursue the only viable option to change the course of a morally repugnant regime, and avoid a catastrophe on the Korean Peninsula, solely out of an understandable but ultimately shortsighted refusal to "reward bad behavior."