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Clinton's Coup in Pyongyang: North Korean Denuclearisation Next?

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The surprising release of two American journalists by North Korea came amidst current tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Is this a North Korean overture to the United States for bilateral nuclear talks?

ON 4 AUGUST 2009, former US President Bill Clinton made a surprise visit to Pyongyang on what was deemed a 'private humanitarian' mission: to secure the release of two American journalists charged with allegedly trespassing North Korean territory and committing "hostile acts" in March this year.

Pyongyang's decision to arrange a meeting between Clinton and Kim Jong-Il was equally surprising, given the reclusive nature of the North Korean leader and his reported failing health. While exact details are lacking, the Korean Central News Agency – Pyongyang's state-controlled media mouthpiece – hailed the discussions between Clinton and Kim as "candid and in-depth". This turn of events came amidst the breakdown of the North Korean denuclearisation process. This somewhat subtle signal from North Korea warrants a closer look whether it can lead to a revival of the denuclearisation process.

Deciphering North Korea's subtle signals

There are some likely reasons for Pyongyang's recent overture. Firstly, at the very least, the Obama Administration has not adopted the hardline stance typical of the previous Bush Administration. It appears that Kim would like to encourage this Obama posture, perhaps recognising the foolhardiness of shutting off all possible diplomatic channels with the present administration.

Secondly, North Korea had struggled hard to be taken off the blacklist of terrorism sponsors – a noteworthy step which could ease Pyongyang's future access to international financial institutions for monetary aid. Recently, however, the Obama Administration has been contemplating putting North Korea back onto the list. Thirdly, and more pragmatically, having openly shunned the Six-Party Talks, Pyongyang might now be pinning hopes on bilateral talks with Washington.

Sanctions apparently would fail to work on North Korea, which has endured many years of isolation and hardship – an ordeal which only served to harden the regime’s resolve and fuel hyper-nationalistic sentiments among its political elite. As far as North Korea is concerned, its deep sense of nationalistic pride meant that subtle signals are required to demonstrate its goodwill in order to achieve constructive political outcomes.

Pyongyang had in fact been using such means to indicate its intentions – for perceivably positive or negative purposes. Much publicity has been made of North Korea’s recent nuclear and missile tests allegedly as a signal to extort economic aid from members of the now-defunct Six-Party Talks. Other more positive signs have generally, however, been less publicised. For instance, in June 2008, North Korea blasted the cooling tower at the Yongbyon nuclear site – a symbolic but somewhat subtle sign of its willingness to commit to the denuclearisation process.

Even earlier in February 2008, the North Korean authorities allowed the New York Philharmonic band to perform in Pyongyang – the first time in the history of US-North Korean cultural exchange. Even though Pyongyang publicly shunned the Six-Party Talks, recent official North Korean statements indicated a willingness to engage in bilateral talks with the US. This time, the release of the detained journalists could possibly be seen as an attempt to signal a readiness to revive the stalled denuclearisation process. Bill Clinton’s role as a mediator for the denuclearisation process – official or otherwise -- could be considered seriously.

Bill Clinton – a likely chief US nuclear envoy to North Korea?

During his tenure as president, Bill Clinton helped secure the Agreed Framework reached with Pyongyang in 1994. North Korea was to abandon its nuclear weapons programme in exchange for economic aid and gradual normalisation of ties with the US. Throughout his administration, Clinton helped improve ties with North Korea, as manifested in high-level official visits in the late-1990s to the beginning of the millennium.

However, North Korea’s denuclearisation process crashed when the Bush Administration took over. Then President Bush openly named North Korea as one of the “axis of evil” countries. This was followed by revelations of an alleged North Korean uranium enrichment programme.

In sum, it was possible to think that the North Korean denuclearisation process could have moved on, if not for the end of Clinton’s term as president and the start of a hardline stance by the Bush Administration.

Pyongyang could well count Bill Clinton as a ‘friend’. Indeed, Clinton has been a highly respected American political figure in the eyes of the North Korean political elite. This is aptly demonstrated by the type of diplomatic treatment – normally reserved for heads of state – accorded to Clinton during this recent trip. The release of the American journalists was reportedly secured after low-profile negotiations between the North Korean authorities and the US State Department. It was even claimed that Clinton was merely present in North Korea to “reap the fruits” of the outcome of negotiations. Whatever is the exact truth does not seem important. What is most crucial might be the possible role of Clinton as a key representative of the US to revive the denuclearisation process.

Strike while the iron is hot

In view of this latest development, there might be a need for the Obama Administration to review its policies towards North Korea to revive the denuclearisation process. There are two possible ways to pick up from Clinton’s visit:

The first would be to temporarily side-step the Six-Party Talks and engage in direct bilateral talks with

Pyongyang. The possibility of restarting multilateral denuclearisation negotiations could be revisited later. The centrepiece of the US delegation engaged in this process could very well be Clinton.

The second way of restarting the denuclearisation process would be to continue efforts to revive the Six-Party Talks with Clinton as the chief nuclear envoy in this process, on behalf of the Obama Administration. Of course, the pivotal role of China could not be neglected. In fact, Clinton could serve as an intermediary alongside the Chinese government to facilitate the multilateral dialogue.

In both instances, Clinton would virtually become the mediator, at least with a valuable role of 'softening' the present stalemate between the US and North Korea. This could then smoothen the way for the revival of denuclearisation talks. Perhaps, it is prudent for both parties to grab this new opportunity to push forward the denuclearisation process and reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

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