

North Korea deadline more than Clinton bargained for

by Linda de Hoyos and Lydia Cherry

The appointment on Dec. 16 of former CIA assistant director Robert Inman as the new secretary of defense of the Clinton administration is not expected to shift an emerging consensus within the administration on its handling of the crisis surrounding North Korea's refusal to open its nuclear facilities to inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). After a series of apparent flip-flops on the issue, the administration's policy appears to be that enunciated by outgoing Defense Secretary Les Aspin on Dec. 12: For now, the United States is limiting its posture to diplomacy and negotiations with North Korea and its believed nuclear capability.

The long-simmering crisis began in 1989, when North Korea gave signals that it was reprocessing plutonium, and fears arose that North Korea was developing a nuclear bomb. Under pressure, Pyongyang signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), but has refused to open up its facilities for full inspection as demanded by the IAEA, the NPT enforcement arm. The crisis, which has since been linked with U.S. pressure to force Ukraine to divest itself of nuclear weapons, went on the front burner in November when President Clinton said a nuclear weapons-capable North Korea is "unacceptable" to the United States. At the same time, IAEA chief Hans Blix, who played a provocative role against Iraq, arbitrarily asserted that unless North Korea opened up its facilities for inspection by the end of December, the IAEA would lose its credibility, the Dec. 12 *Washington Post* reported.

The North Korea nuclear crisis began in 1989, when it was noticed that Pyongyang signaled its reprocessing of plutonium, and the nuclear issue has been a major point in which the United States has intervened in the stop-and-start negotiations between North and South on the reunification of the Korean peninsula over the same time period. United States concern is multifold.

Secretary of State Warren Christopher has declared that nuclear non-proliferation is a number-one priority. On Dec. 7, Clinton also ordered a more active policy to counter the spread of nuclear weapons. "The new nuclear danger we face is perhaps a handful of nuclear devices in the hands of rogue states or even terrorist groups," said Defense Secretary Aspin announcing the plan.

Second, the United States, columnists have openly stated, is not interested in a united Korean peninsula which also possesses a nuclear weapons capability.

A nuclear weapons-capable North Korea represents a major shift in the military balance in the region. At the July meeting of the Group of Seven industrialized nations, former Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa told Clinton point-blank that if the United States does not succeed in removing North Korea's nuclear fang, then Japan will have no choice but to develop its nuclear weapons capability, independent of the U.S. "nuclear umbrella." Japan has urged the United States to use diplomacy with the North to solve the crisis.

Assurances to Japan

Perhaps to assure the Japanese that the United States is fully prepared to see the crisis through, U.S. Undersecretary for Arms Control and International Proliferation Lynn Davis on Dec. 14 told Japanese TV that the United States may ask the U.N. to place economic sanctions on North Korea if it continues to refuse full inspection by the IAEA of its inspection sites, Reuters reported. She also said that China probably would not exercise its right to veto such a resolution.

Lastly, North Korea, despite its bravado on the nuclear question, is in a precarious position. It is bereft of its former Soviet sponsor. The People's Republic of China has not rushed its support to Pyongyang against the IAEA. Its economy is in dire straits. For some this is the moment of opportunity to bring the *chuche* ("self-reliance") regime to a well-deserved, inglorious end.

For now, the Clinton administration is keeping to a policy of negotiation. Speaking to reporters Dec. 12 on "Meet the Press," all of whom were demanding to know how the United States would carry out Clinton's statement that a nuclear North Korea is unacceptable, Defense Secretary Aspin stated that "what we are pursuing at the moment is the diplomatic objective. We are trying to enter into negotiations on a whole range of security issues, which will include the nuclear security issue." Such negotiations undoubtedly also include China, Japan, and South Korea. Aspin further noted that technical information available to U.S. intelligence indicated that the North Koreans are not now "developing more plutonium in order to be able to make more nuclear bombs." The situa-

tion is “dangerous,” the defense secretary said, “but it is no more dangerous today than it was, as I say, six months ago or three months ago.”

The defense secretary also affirmed that, in the hypothetical case that North Korea reacts to U.N.-imposed sanctions by invading South Korea, the invasion would be considered an attack on the United States.

Within the U.S. establishment, the *New York Times* has been the most vocal proponent for a policy of diplomacy. On Dec. 7, the *Times* editorialized that the United States should offer “an enticing deal. First, just as the IAEA inspectors are visiting the reactor at Yongbyon, North-South and high-level U.S.-North Korean negotiators would meet. The U.S. and South Korea would inform the North of cancellation of their Team Spirit military exercises. The U.S. could then propose a broader package deal. In return for full access to all sites, and an end to North Korea’s missile sales, the U.S. could offer diplomatic recognition, reassurance on U.S. nuclear arms, a light-water reactor for the North to generate nuclear power, and negotiation of a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War.”

The *Times* agenda coheres with that of Selig Harrison of Carnegie Endowment, who told a high-level panel on Dec. 16, which included former National Security Adviser Richard Allen and former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, that “carrots are better than sticks.” Aside from seconding the recommendations of the *New York Times*, Harrison also sees dollars in North Korea.

According to Harrison, who has served as the unofficial U.S. envoy to Pyongyang since the mid-1970s, a “pragmatist” faction exists in North Korea, which reaches even into the Kim Il-sung family, including Prime Minister Kan Song-san, who was dispatched to Beijing in early December to reopen Pyongyang relations after China’s August recognition of Seoul.

Harrison suggests that this “pragmatist” grouping can be turned into a duplicate of the Deng Xiaoping leadership in Beijing. This pragmatist grouping, said Harrison, is “closely associated with the Joint Venture Law; establishment of the new Free Trade Zone as part of the Tumen River Delta Project being pushed by the United Nations in cooperation with Russia, China, and North Korea. The North Korea free trade zones—they are offering foreign investors a five-year tax holiday, and after that a 14% corporate tax rate, and, we learned last week that in some new regulations, they said that visas won’t be required, in order to get into this zone.”

The next Korean war . . .

But it is likely that military considerations, and not the prospect of free-trade looting of North Korea, is what has turned the United States toward a diplomatic course. According to Robert Novak, writing in the Dec. 16 *Washington Post*, “President Clinton has been backed down by his military advisers from a virtual ultimatum to North Korea.”

Senior military and State Department officials, press sources reported, warned Clinton that a conventional war in South Korea would not be the same kind of cinch as U.S. military actions in Panama, Iraq, and Somalia. A secret meeting between Clinton and his military advisers on Dec. 10 led to the Aspin press statements on diplomacy of Dec. 12, according to various sources. According to a classified Defense Department assessment leaked to the *Washington Post* Dec. 12, a conventional war with North Korea would require up to four months of “very high-intensity combat” by a combined South Korean and U.S. force that would include U.S. reinforcements beyond those used in the war against Iraq. A plan to repel any North Korean attack on South Korea was reviewed with Clinton on Dec. 10, reported the *Post*.

U.S. senior military officials are saying they are not sure North Korea could be stopped before it reaches the South’s capital, Seoul. On Dec. 14, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Shalikashvili said that “there’s a very good likelihood” that Seoul would be defended by South Korean and U.S. forces, but he would not guarantee it. A March 1991 classified Pentagon report, said the *Post*, also suggested the “North might win with a checkmate strategy that threw half of its forces against Seoul and the other half down the east coast to seize Pusan and Kimhaie in the south”—entry points for U.S. reinforcements.

Military officials are also not terribly sanguine that an air strike, like that carried out in 1981 by Israel against Iraq’s nuclear plant, would be effective in knocking out any North Korean nuclear weapons capability, since it is believed the North has placed most of its industrial and military capabilities underground. Furthermore, Gen. Merrill McPeak stated publicly, such bombing raids would produce radiation enveloping South Korea.

Fools rush in?

The prospect of total war on the Korean peninsula, however, has not deterred various war-mongers. On Dec. 14, *Washington Post* columnist Lally Weymouth averred that diplomacy has already proven a failure. Clinton has no choice but to go to the U.N. Security Council and demand sanctions against North Korea, imposing a full sea blockade that would prevent Pyongyang from importing its energy requirements from China and Iran.

If sanctions don’t work, then “the American President needs to be prepared to explain to the world that Washington will not allow nuclear weapons to fall into the hands of international gangsters”—that is, will use military force against North Korea. Otherwise, Weymouth says, nuclear proliferation will rise to unacceptable levels. Weymouth cited as her authority on the issue, Kissinger Associates member Lawrence Eagleburger, quoting him as saying: “If you’re not prepared to use force, then you’re nowhere. If we let them build their weapons program, one day we’ll wonder why we stood around waiting.”