

DINNER MEETING WITH VICE MINISTER RI YONG HO

Potonggang Hotel
1800-2100, November 12, 2010

Also present: Choe Son Hye, Deputy Director General, Bureau of American Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BAA); Gwon Jong Gun, Desk Officer, BAA; Sok Won Hyok, Researcher, BAA.

After pleasantries related to earlier meetings with Ri, especially by Carlin (Lewis had met Ri Yong Ho during Vice Marshall Jo Myong Nok's visit to Washington in October 2000), Hecker began by noting that the time is very short before the news breaks concerning construction at Yongbyon of the LWR and the operation of the industrial-scale uranium enrichment (UE) "workshop." He said that he would explain to a wider public audience what we saw after he (Hecker) had briefed officials in Washington on what we saw and discussed with engineers at Yongbyon.

Hecker said it does not appear that Jack Pritchard has publicized his visit and announced the LWR construction. What is DPRK's plan for announcement? Ri said they have no plans for publicizing what we saw. They have already made their official statements [presumably their statements in 2009].

Hecker asked if he had been out to the Yongbyon site to see the construction. He said no. When asked, he also said he has not seen photographs. When we asked if we could get photos of the enrichment plant, Ri answered that one doesn't do that for proprietary reasons. Ri asked us if the round structure of the reactor is already in place. Hecker also mentioned his concerns about the safety of the reactor.

Carlin then discussed his political concerns about the likely negative reaction when the news breaks. Officials in Washington and many others, especially those in the media, he said, will react with great concern and give a negative interpretation to what we will say about the visit today to the Yongbyon nuclear facility.

Vice Minister Ri responded: "When we reached the decision to construct the LWR and UE facility, I voiced my concerns. However, we reviewed the situation on the Korean Peninsula and in U.S.-DPRK policy and reached the conclusion that America's Korea policy will not change. We had to find a way out. Engagement with the U.S., if it happened, would not be as fruitful as it was before. Now the U.S. is having problems of its own. These days we hear the news daily that the U.S. is wrestling with China. So, the U.S. is not prepared to have real engagement with us. The U.S. has more pressing problems. Therefore, we decided we must do this LWR project on our own. If the U.S. should want to change and have dialogue with us, we are fully prepared to respond. But, we will not ask for dialogue. If the U.S. is not happy about enrichment, and the U.S. want to change its policy, that's up to you."

Carlin responded by noting, "The tragedy is one of timing, as we've faced many times before. In July [this year], there began to be signs in Washington that the current [U.S.-Korea] policy is not working, and Washington began looking for ways to engage [the DPRK]. Now it seems this initial reevaluation will be crushed under the weight of these new developments."

Ri said, "I have been working with you [Carlin] and other American partners who want progress in our relations for a long time. But these kinds of people -- like you -- are always small."

Carlin asked if the Chinese knew about the new facilities at Yongbyon. Ri said that the Chinese had been told about the centrifuges. Hecker then asked, "How will China react to the LWR news?" Ri replied, "We have already told them. As to their reaction, I am not sure, but they will be more understanding. We put it this way: We told the Chinese that our official statement in April 2009 was not a lie but the truth and that we have started the LWR construction." Hecker mentioned that in his discussions with Chinese nuclear scientists he finds that they underestimated DPRK capabilities. Ri answered, "So did you."

Ri continued: If you tell Americans that we have begun the LWR project, will they believe you? This [news] will be difficult to explain politically but the political story will be very important. If they [the Americans] are really concerned, they first must think and then act in ways that will make the DPRK feel safe. The problem is whenever the U.S. changes administrations, everything changes. What would make the DPRK feel safe? Do you remember the October 2000 Joint Communiqué? It would be important if the U.S. reaffirmed this document in some way. Personally, I still want this revival. If the present administration can reaffirm this document and show seriousness that would be quite helpful."

Lewis then discussed other aspects of the current DPRK visit including Stanford's role in the building of the Tuberculosis National Reference Laboratory and in this trip reaching an educational cooperation agreement with the Education Committee.

Ri said: "We have often thought about doing cultural cooperation with the Americans, but now we are not sure. The return visit of our State Symphony after your New York orchestra came to Pyongyang in February 2008 has been blocked, for example." Carlin suggested maybe we should try for something smaller, such as a tour by the young woman pianist [Jong Kyong Hui] we heard on Thursday.

Ri then turned to the question of strategic patience. "The so-called U.S. 'strategic patience' policy comes from the notion that Washington does not know how to deal with us. Americans think they have been deceived by North Korea and don't know how to deal. But many people think that strategic patience is not bad for us, that it gives us time to finish the LWR and produce the [low enriched uranium] fuel for it. We can wait. Time is what we need.

"There are two remarkable things: What we have and what we let you see."

Lewis asked, "What did you hope to accomplish with letting us see the two facilities at Yongbyon? In spite of the negatives, we need to interpret the positive as well as the negative side of this news."

Ri said, “Last year, we announced we would go this way; we wanted to show that we are serious. Overall, personally I believe Americans are closely following developments in our country. Particularly, in September we had a big meeting and elected a new leadership. There was speculation that the leadership change would mean a change in our basic policy. We wanted to answer there would be no change. The next leader of the Party will not change our policy. He will take over *songun* [military-first] politics as well.

“As for nuclear weapons, we want to be clear. Korea’s nuclear weapons will be around as long as the US continues to be hostile to the DPRK, that’s for sure.”

“Let me talk about now. Our LWR and enrichment are peaceful at the moment. I say “at the moment” because I don’t know if one day the military people will ask the Yongbyon people to take that technology for their use. I’m doing my best to see it doesn’t happen. We argued in the past that with the Yongbyon people that we could get an LWR from the outside. They didn’t believe [that we could get the LWR from the outside]. They said they could do it themselves.”

“If the Obama Administration wants or finds the need to talk to us on nonproliferation, we can discuss horizontal and vertical proliferation. Yet, to do even this, you say this is a matter related to relations between the North and South. On this, Obama says before the Six Party Talks, there must be progress in North-South relations, but the Obama Administration should be very careful about listening to the South Korean government. We made the biggest progress with the previous two South Korean governments, but the present government reminds us of the government of Kim Yong-sam. Because of him, we lost time, and so President Clinton didn’t visit in 2000. If he had, we would have exploded no nuclear weapons and tested no long-range missiles. History repeats. The Obama Administration has very big ears to listen to South Korea.”

Hecker asked what could be done to reduce the likelihood of military intervention. For example, “The presence of the U.S. technical team [at Yongbyon] now could add confidence in the U.S. [presumably about the peaceful purpose of the LWR]. And there are many other things that could be done.” Ri answered, “We have thought about this. But most of our people don’t care if the Americans are skeptical and negative or not. One day the military might want to take over this [enrichment] facility. The reason for our having nuclear weapons hasn’t diminished, it has increased. You have the aircraft carrier in the West Sea [the Korean name for the Yellow Sea].

“The U.S. administration doesn’t think of the DPRK as a country; it just thinks of us as an enemy to collapse or change. The U.S. has diplomatic relations with 188 out of the 192 member states in the U.N. Only four are outside the U.S. realm, Iran, Cuba, Bhutan (which is part of India), and the DPRK. When the U.S. sees us this way, how can we see them as a normal dialogue partner? This matters. We’ve been talking about dialogue not between normal states. America sees us as not normal. We’re the same. Our people see America as evil. Hecker can understand what he sees but not those in Washington.

“Yet, we are still ready for dialogue – not for dialogue itself but for dialogue with results. We need to see political will on America’s part. If the U.S. is truly concerned about nuclear

proliferation, it can think about finding the root cause and treat it. In the case of Korea, the root cause is deep mistrust.”

After a brief comment by Hecker on the demand and supply “sides” of proliferation, Ri continued: “Unless the U.S. deals with the demand side, it is useless. It must deal with why countries want nuclear weapons. Cutting the supply side can only work for a short time. The only people who can stop the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program are those in the DPRK!”

Carlin said that he sensed a significant change in the DPRK approach. He noted that in the 1990s, Pyongyang wanted to improve relations with the U.S. “Now, I am hearing you say, we don’t care about improving U.S.-DPRK relations.”

Ri said, “Some in our country now say, we hope this [improvement with the U.S.] doesn’t happen because if it doesn’t we can continue the development of our deterrent. Most say that we can’t disarm until we are absolutely safe. Recognizing us as a sovereign state, that must be the beginning.”

Carlin then asked, “As a hypothetical example, if we did re-engage with you and did recognize the DPRK on the condition of the ‘three no’s’ – no more tests, no more bombs, and no nuclear exports – how would you view this?” Hecker then added a comment about the “three no’s” and the importance of at least one significant “yes” on the U.S. part. Ri said, “We understand the ‘three no’s’ and the one ‘yes’ exactly as you [Hecker] said. But it doesn’t matter if this comes from you [Hecker]. If the U.S. Government asks that question, I will answer it.” Ri said the “three no’s” are what they view as no vertical proliferation and no horizontal proliferation. Hecker added that we would have to handle the uranium enrichment issue.

Ri continued with some emphasis: “Every time, Korea was held hostage to American politics. Every time, the one to suffer was us. If Obama were really concerned about the American national interest, he would make a good decision. But, how can we get him [meaning U.S. officials] to sit down with us?”

Lewis then quoted the well-known Chinese word for “crisis” [*weiji*] being made up of the characters for “danger” and “opportunity,” and wondered how Vice Minister Ri might see this as an opportunity as well as a moment of danger. “If I were an official in the White House or State Department, this [LWR] development would be a major opportunity, as you had asked whether it might be. This is an opportunity for Obama to live up to his campaign promise to sit down with any country’s leaders to solve important problems. So far, he has not done this.

“You will recall that when Bush was president, he got his impression of the DPRK by reading just one book, a North Korea defector’s book. He often referred to this book when he made his decision that we were evil. He got his mindset from just one book! Even now he reminds the world that this is till his mindset in his book *Decision Point*.

“But Obama reads many books. Hecker mentioned Prague. He laid out his nuclear standpoint and his nuclear agenda at the beginning of his presidency. He said that it was not just the rest of the world that has to change with respect to nuclear weapons but that the U.S. would

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also have to change. From his reading of many books, he delivered his important Prague speech on his vision of a “world free of nuclear weapons,” and for this, he won the Nobel Peace Prize.” But in practice, Hecker asked Ri what he would do if he could write the script. Ri said: “We are prepared to talk with the U.S. If we can sit down, one thing we can talk about as a point of departure is nuclear proliferation – horizontal and vertical.” Hecker asked “you mean the ‘three no’s?’” Ri said yes.

He ended this dinner table conversation with this: “The building of the LWR and the uranium enrichment facility was not our own choice. We were forced to do it. Since this was not our *choice*, we have the opportunity to do something about this. That is the choice! We must make the results useful to both countries.”

(As we were ending the evening’s discussion, Lewis thanked Vice Minister Ri for approving our delegation’s visit and the excellent opportunity to discuss the major issues with him. Lewis added that it would be important to return to the DPRK soon – in part to complete the agreement with the Education Committee – and Ri said this should be okay.)