

Reading Between the Lines: Clinton's Trip and the Six Party Talks

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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's choice of Asia as the destination for her inaugural tour gave recognition to the significance of U.S. alliances and strategic interests in the region. From February 16–22, Secretary Clinton visited Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and China. Highly publicized, each capital stop had a similar agenda, focusing on common approaches to the challenges facing the international community—namely the financial markets turmoil, humanitarian issues, security, and climate change. With a few exceptions, the words “North Korea” were strikingly absent from her trip's primary agenda—perhaps a deliberate message to the region that the United States' interests there run deeper than the North Korean “issue.”

However, the trip was not uneventful with regards to North Korea and the Six Party Talks. Below are some of the key statements and events from Clinton's trip that carry significance for the future of the Six Party process.

The Play by Play: Points of Interest from Clinton's Asia Trip

A Special Envoy and a Special Representative

On her stop in Seoul, Secretary Clinton publicly named Stephen Bosworth, former ambassador to South Korea and current dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University (and Chair of KEI's Advisory Council), as the new U.S. special representative for North Korea. Ambassador Bosworth will coordinate overall U.S. government policy on North Korea, while Sung Kim will replace Christopher Hill as head of delegation at the Six Party Talks. Tasked with working with South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia to find ways to get Pyongyang back to the negotiating table and deal with broader policy, Bosworth will also be responsible for addressing human rights and humanitarian issues, Clinton said. Interestingly, while at press time Bosworth is already headed to Tokyo, Beijing, and Seoul to begin discussions, he will be keeping his day job as Dean of Fletcher.

Giving Deference to the Japanese Abductee Issue... Where Appropriate

During her stopover in Japan, Secretary Clinton went out of her way to show U.S. concern and solidarity with Japan on the issue of the North Korean abduction of Japanese citizens during the 1970s and 80s. The year 2008 concluded amidst rocky U.S.-Japan relations after the United States removed North Korea from its State Sponsors of Terrorism list in October, effectively isolating Japan, which has insisted that the abductions remain a top priority at the talks and their address by North Korea a precondition for its removal from the terrorism list. Clinton took the time to meet with the families of two abductees and said the issue was an “important matter” for both her and President Obama, though no promises were made to reinstate Pyongyang on the terrorism list.

Clinton and China: No Mention of North Korea

During her three days in Beijing, Secretary Clinton was expected to discuss current tensions with the Kim Jong-il regime. However, her meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi focused on clean energy, climate change, the global economic difficulty, bilateral human rights concerns, and military ties—everything but North Korea. Publicly, no mention was made of any North Korea-related discussion between the two top diplomats.

Of particular note while she was in Beijing, Secretary Clinton indicated to Foreign Minister Yang that human rights issues would not be an impediment to the larger, more important issues the two countries face. While a number of “issues” were being referred to, it is important to note that this realistic view might be applied with regards to North Korea and the Six Party Talks as well—specifically, that the United States might increase its pressure on Japan to re-prioritize active involvement in the denuclearization process over its desire to resolve the abduction issue, considered by many Japanese to be a human rights issue.

A Trip Aside: Highly Enriched What?

A week after South Korean intelligence reports were leaked regarding North Korea’s alleged uranium enrichment program, Secretary Clinton expressed her doubts on the existence of such a program. In an interview with Fox News on February 20, she said, “I think that there is a sense, among many who have studied this, that there may be some program somewhere, but no one can point to any specific location nor can they point to any specific outcome of whatever might have gone on, if anything did.” Clinton’s “doubt” about North Korean HEU program marks a decided shift from previous U.S. government officials.

Straight Talk to North Korea

Throughout the trip, the Secretary did discuss some security concerns regarding North Korea, even addressing the North’s regime directly on a couple of occasions. In Seoul, she called the North Korean government’s rule “tyranny,” but afterwards offered normalized ties and economic help if it abandoned its nuclear weapons program. She also implored North Korea to change its current course of harsh rhetoric and hostility toward the South, insisting that the North is “not going to get a different relationship with the United States while insulting and refusing dialogue with the Republic of Korea.”

Additionally, Clinton made a statement insisting that North Korea agree to verifiable inspections of its nuclear facilities—a more explicit demand than those heard for some time from the Bush administration, and one that received praise from Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso.

Overall, what Secretary Clinton did say about North Korea reflects a tough stance in which the Obama administration wants complete denuclearization of North Korea before offering any concessions—a sharp contrast from unconditional diplomatic engagement as many interpreted his position to be during the campaign. She also repeatedly urged the North to stop its “provocative actions,” saying that a missile test of any kind would be “very unhelpful.”

Missile Test?

Secretary Clinton’s warnings to North Korea do not come unwarranted. The reclusive country has fueled regional tensions in the past weeks by readying a test-flight of its longest-range missile, the Taepodong-2, capable of reaching Alaska. If realized, this could be the North’s first successful Taepodong-2 launch, and the first attempt since July 2006.

Meanwhile, the North argues that it is planning to launch an experimental communications satellite into orbit as part of its space development program. The DPRK’s Korean Central Broadcasting Station (KCBS) argued, “The peaceful advance into space and its use is a just policy of our republic that matches with the current times, and no one can stop us from this. Everyone is entitled to the right to peaceful space use.” This is coming on the heels of an Iranian “satellite” launch earlier in February.

In 1998, North Korea unsuccessfully launched a “satellite” that was widely believed to have been a Taepodong-1 missile.

North Korea has cut off dialogue with the South and threatened to reduce it to ashes in anger at South Korean President Lee's policy of cutting off what once had been a free flow of unconditional “sunshine policy” aid. “Their talking about the non-existent ‘missile threat’ (from the North) ... is a tactic to justify their intention to invade the North and speed up building a missile defense system targeting us,” the North announced.

North Korea has successfully resisted efforts to include the discussion of missiles in the Six Party nuclear talks; however, the United States, South Korea, and Japan contend that a test launch would be in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1718 (October 2006).

Imminent Action?

During her trip, Secretary Clinton became the first high level diplomat to make a public statement regarding what comes after Kim Jong-il. “If there is a succession, even if it’s a peaceful succession, that creates more uncertainty, and it may also encourage behaviors that are even more provocative, as a way to consolidate power within the society...” Potentially addressing what many believe to be a current internal power struggle within the regime, she said, “Our goal is try to come up with a strategy that is effective in influencing the behavior of the North Koreans, at a time when the whole leadership situation is somewhat unclear.”

Amidst doubts about the stability of Kim Jong-il’s regime, increasing tension between the two Koreas on the peninsula, and a “low priority” agenda spot given to the North on this trip’s agenda, many believe a cry-for-attention missile test is imminent. While many concur with Secretary Clinton’s praise of Bosworth as a “capable and experienced diplomat,” who she made clear would be reporting to both her and the president, the question remains how will North Korea react to being considered a part-time consideration for the United States? And will this reaction come in the form of a rocket?