

## **China's North Korean Nightmare**

*By Edward Lanfranco*

BEIJING -- China's first foray into multilateral diplomacy designed to stave off an international crisis happening on its doorstep is a fortnight away from being declared dead.

North Korea -- the Democratic People's Republic of Korea -- has two weeks to change its mind and honor its obligations made in June 2004, when it agreed to return to the negotiating table of the Six-Party Talks by the end of September.

Northeast Asia is on the precipice of a nuclear arms race that, as a worse case scenario, will more than double the number of countries in the region openly possessing weapons of mass destruction.

Aside from Russia and China, which have had the bomb for decades, North Korea's continued intransigence in moving forward the Chinese-sponsored Six-Party Talks is likely to spur Japan and South Korea attaining WMD to assure their survival.

China says it has no answers since the mysterious explosion and mushroom cloud detected by satellites on Sept. 9 inside North Korea's Kim Hyong-jik County in Ryanggang Province near the Chinese border.

Speaking to the press on Sept. 14, Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan challenged a reporter's question about the event and its distance from Chinese territory, saying no one in China heard it.

Kong sidestepped United Press International questions about Chinese radiation and seismic data that would corroborate U.S. and South Korean analyses that it was a non-nuclear event.

Asked about the explosion again on Sept. 16, Kong said, "We don't know what happened."

Most analysts give the Six-Party process two chances of occurring within the next 14 days: slim and none.

If some last-minute miracle produces a fourth round of the Six-Party Talks before Sept. 30, it will be a pro-forma face-saving ritual brokered by the Chinese government after considerable behind the scenes arm-twisting of the isolated Stalinist regime.

Since the end of the third round, North Korea has refused to participate in Six-Party technical working group discussions needed to lay the groundwork for progress in the subsequent round of negotiations.

Now, with the meeting deadline fast approaching, North Korea is using the recent revelations about South Korea's limited uranium and plutonium experiments plus the upcoming U.S. presidential election as excuses to delay, if not kill, the Six-Party Talks.

China's last-ditch effort in the form of a Sept. 10-13 trip led by high-ranking Party member Li Changchun did not succeed. Looking at the delegation roster offers some insight on China's goals during the mission.

Li was a logical choice by the Chinese leadership in reaching out to North Korea. He ranks eighth on the nine-member Standing Committee of the Communist Party Political Bureau. The politburo is the highest echelon of political power in China.

According to his official biography Li, 60, was born in Dalian, Liaoning Province, which abuts North Korea. He joined the Communist Party in 1965 on the eve of the Cultural Revolution and worked his way up the ranks of local politics serving as the city mayor and party chief in Shenyang, the provincial capital, later becoming Liaoning's governor and deputy party secretary.

This part of his career (1965-1990) gave Li numerous opportunities to meet and become familiar in working relations with North Korean counterparts.

Li's rise to the inner circle of power started in the 1980s, when China was led by Deng Xiaoping. He earned a reputation as a bold reformer dealing with the problem of shutting down inefficient state-owned enterprises in Liaoning, part of the northeastern industrial rust belt.

These efforts not only helped put him on the fast track to the top ranks within China, but lend legitimacy to Li offering advice on what North Korea needs to do in reforming its basket-case economy.

The outward purpose of Li's visit was described as regular fraternal contact between the two Communist parties and governments. He was invited by the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea and the North Korean government.

Information from Xinhua listed Wang Jiarui and Liu Hongcai, respectively the head and deputy of the Central Committee's International Department, plus Ji Bingxuan, executive deputy head of the Central Committee's Publicity Department, as members of the Li entourage.

Other delegates included the Chinese government's Minister of Culture Sun Jiazheng, Vice Minister Gao Hucheng from the Ministry of Commerce and Vice Minister Wu Dawei from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Recent public activities by known entourage members offer an interesting perspective on what transpired during China's latest dealings with North Korea.

Wang Jiarui was in charge of the International Conference of Asia Political Parties hosted by Beijing earlier this month. He is known to have met with Communist Party members from Japan and Vietnam. Wang talked with Newt Gingrich and other members of an American Foreign Policy Council delegation in August.

Liu Hongcai met with Kim Hyong-o, leader of South Korea's Grand National Party (the main opposition Party) during the conference to defuse tensions in relations arising over a controversy regarding the nationality of people in the ancient Korean kingdom of Koguryo.

There are no reports of Wang or Liu meeting with North Korean representatives during the conference. Kong could not confirm for UPI if historical controversy was discussed in the DPRK.

Information on the recent doings of Ji Bingxuan is unavailable. He was described by foreign media covering the North Korean trip as "the Communist Party's leading foreign affairs official." This refers to the consultative body within the CPC organization, and not a change in status for Li Zhaoxing, China's Minister of Foreign Affairs, also a party member.

The least important member of the entourage, Sun Jiazheng, had a busy August.

Last month the Culture minister was slapped a lawsuit filed in Australia by the Falun Gong, a cult-like spiritual group banned and largely crushed

across the mainland.

Sun also attended events in Hong Kong for the 100th anniversary of Deng Xiaoping's birth plus praised the national legislature for approving China's acceptance of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) convention on "safeguarding intangible cultural heritage."

Scintillating snippets of Chinese television news coverage during the North Korea visit designed to convey a sense of normalcy to the public, included a song and dance performance that Sun and other delegates watched.

The remaining members of Li's government entourage are key parts of the puzzle in figuring out China's agenda on the North Korea trip.

There's been no recent news coverage of Gao Hucheng's activities, but his biography makes him a delegate to North Korea worth monitoring in future economic ties between the two countries.

Born in 1951, Gao earned a Ph.D. in Sociology from a Parisian university in 1985 and joined the party in 1987. He has worked in machinery export and natural resource organizations as well as a senior economist with expertise in planning and finance under the former Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation. Gao was promoted to vice minister of China's newly formed Ministry of Commerce in 2003.

Last was the highly significant presence of Wu Daowei. Wu joined the delegation as a vice foreign minister after finishing a three-year assignment as China's ambassador to Japan in August 2004. He was China's ambassador to South Korea between 1998 and 2001.

Wu's mission was twofold, according to several foreign Asian and Western diplomats based in Beijing who spoke with UPI on condition of anonymity.

His stints as China's top representative to South Korea and Japan were employed to brief North Korea on the anxieties and concerns of its two neighbors. Wu also serves as a conduit giving these countries China's interpretation on the situation in North Korea.

On Sept. 11 China's state-controlled news carried separate stories about North Korea's insistence on linking South Korea's nuclear program to the talks as well as the results of Li Changchun's first round of meetings.

After talking with Kim Yong Nam, president of the Presidium of the North Korean Supreme People's Assembly, Li was quoted saying, "the bilateral friendship initiated by leaders of elder generations of the two countries is based on deep historical links and firm political foundations."

While it may sound like palaver from a bygone era to Western ears, Chinese-North Korean relations are truly rooted in shared history as Communist allies weathering the first armed conflict of the Cold War.

Kim Yong Nam spoke highly of "China's independent foreign policy of peace," which "fully demonstrated that China's domestic and foreign policies are correct," according to Xinhua. Some analysts interpret the statements as meaning there is no outward change in the country's stance toward support of the North Korean regime.

At a separate meeting with North Korean Cabinet Premier Pak Bong Ju, Li said the two sides "are willing to further develop bilateral economic and trade cooperation as the two countries are faced with good opportunities and vast potential." These keywords indicate China will continue to dole out economic aid.

The most telling comments came after Li Changchun's meeting with North Korea's supreme leader Kim Jong-il on Sept.12. Li twice mentioned the need for the two sides to "strengthen cooperation" in international and regional issues.

When UPI asked the Foreign Ministry spokesman on Thursday why bilateral cooperation needed to be bolstered, given the depth and breadth of ties between China and North Korea, Kong replied: "Our relationship is changing as the situation changes."

In light of the unexplained explosion on China's border, the Xinhua report of Kim Jong-il's comment after meeting with Li takes on a chilling meaning. Kim "expressed his belief that the flower of friendship will blossom more beautifully in the new century."

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