

# Will nukes creep into Bill Clinton's North Korea agenda?

**The former president was in Pyongyang Tuesday seeking the release of two American journalists. But talks could go beyond that.**

By **Howard LaFranchi** | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor  
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Former US president Bill Clinton and North Korea's leader Kim Jong-il pose for a picture in Pyongyang in this photo released by North Korean official news agency KCNA Tuesday. Clinton made a surprise visit to the isolationist state in an attempt to win the release of two jailed American journalists.  
KCNA/REUTERS

*WASHINGTON* - A door could open to progress on issues including North Korea's nuclear program if both the US and Pyongyang gain something from former President Clinton's surprise visit Tuesday, some longtime analysts of diplomacy with Pyongyang say.

North Korea's regime will be seeking heightened prestige, in particular at home, and the US will want the release of two jailed US journalists.

"This is not a zero-sum game, and if both sides get what they want, then it's a win-win that everyone should be able to live with," says Jim Walsh, a North Korea expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's security studies program.

"Beyond that, the possibility is always there that a satisfied Kim Jong-il" – the North's reclusive and ailing dictator – "could change with the wave of a hand the trajectory of US-North Korea relations."

But with Mr. Clinton still on the ground in Pyongyang, the reaction to the visit in Washington and Pyongyang was a study in contrasts.

North Korea, which has sought for years to elevate its standing by achieving direct talks with the US over its rogue nuclear program, took the rare step of ushering the former president into a brief meeting with the ailing Mr. Kim. Official North Korean news photos showed a beaming Kim greeting a solemn Clinton, while the official news dispatch said the two leaders engaged in a "wide-ranging exchange of views."

That encounter took place after Clinton was greeted at the Pyongyang airport by high-ranking officials – including the North's chief negotiator in its stalled international talks on its nuclear program.

The tone in Washington was virtually the opposite, with the White House declaring Clinton's visit a "solely private" mission. President Obama's spokesman, Robert Gibbs, dismissed as "not true" a North Korean official news dispatch stating that Clinton had relayed a "verbal message" from Mr. Obama to Kim.

So which side will get what it wants? Will Pyongyang successfully turn a mercy mission into the broader talks with the US that it covets? Or will Washington be able to keep what it sees as a "humanitarian issue" separate from a nuclear issue it portrays not as a US-North Korea problem, but as a problem between the North and the entire international community?

A successful mission for Clinton – securing the release of Laura Ling and Euna Lee – risks coming at the price of efforts to curb the North's nuclear program, says Bruce Klingner, a North Korea specialist at the Heritage Foundation in Washington.

Even if Clinton sticks strictly to his "humanitarian mission," Mr. Klingner says that any perceived "breakthrough" in US-North Korea relations would likely prompt countries such as China and Russia to ease their application of sanctions the UN has slapped on Pyongyang this year.

That risk helps explain why the White House has insisted that Clinton is on a "solely private" visit with no instructions from Obama. Still, it is unlikely Clinton would not have used his visit with Kim to move beyond the topic of the journalists, regional experts say.

"It is hard to imagine that the former president will not both scold North Korea for its nuclear and missile tests and reiterate the Obama administration's desire to reengage in negotiations if the North is serious about denuclearization," says Victor Cha, a Korea expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

Whether officially instructed or not, Clinton very likely used his visit with Kim to recommend a return to the six-party talks the North said earlier this year it has definitively abandoned, says MIT's Mr. Walsh, who has visited North Korea and met with officials.

Despite the White House's insistence, the visit of a former president – whose wife is the current secretary of state – can't help but have an impact beyond the case of the two journalists, Walsh adds.

"It's being able to make use of a rare face-to-face encounter," he says, "with the man who determines North Korea's policy."

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