



## North Korean nuclear issues and the role of parliamentary diplomacy

International efforts to dismantle the nuclear program of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, hereafter North Korea, have been marked by limited and inconsistent engagement and distrust. One often-overlooked diplomatic process that has been continuous and has supported the development of greater trust is parliamentary diplomacy.

Parliamentary diplomacy is best known as a process for dialogue between parliamentarians of different countries, typified by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). With globalisation and the greater impact of foreign affairs on domestic politics, parliamentarians have also started to undertake roles commonly associated with traditional diplomats, including the tasks of representation, negotiation and mediation.

### Constraints on traditional diplomacy

International efforts to dismantle the North Korean nuclear weapons program have proven difficult due to the country's diplomatic isolation.

North Korea's diplomatic isolation has steadily grown throughout its short history. It started from the unenviable position of the aggressor in the Korean War (1950–53)—the first major armed conflict in the Cold War. During the 1970s, North Korea failed to repay trade debts, leading many states to cut commercial ties. By 1975, North Korea owed western countries around \$1.58 billion (US\$1.24 billion), including \$62 million to Australian creditors.<sup>1</sup> With limited political or cultural affinities, diplomatic ties also subsequently suffered.

Also during the 1970s, the actions of individual North Korean diplomats further strained relations with a number of countries. Diplomatic staff in Norway, Denmark and Finland were declared *persona non gratae* by the host governments after having allegedly been involved in black-market activities. Diplomats in Sweden also departed on the commencement of investigations into similar charges.<sup>2</sup> In an unrelated incident, North Korean diplomats departed Canberra unexpectedly in 1975, and Australian diplomats were subsequently expelled from

North Korea.

North Korea has also been isolated due to its alleged involvement in terrorism. Attempts to increase diplomatic interaction with the non-aligned movement failed when, in October 1983, an assassination attempt on the South Korean President in Burma was attributed to North Korea.

North Korea found itself further isolated in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse. In desperation, during the late 1990s North Korea made efforts to re-establish diplomatic relations with a number of states, including Australia. Relations also warmed with the United States, culminating in a visit by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in October 2000.

However, diplomatic isolation increased dramatically in October 2002, when the United States accused North Korea of conducting a covert nuclear program in contravention of the 1994 Agreed Framework. The Agreed Framework required North Korea to freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear program in return for energy supplies and the construction of 'proliferation-proof' light-water reactors (LWRs). Needless to say, the level of isolation under which North Korea continues to interact with the international community has not been conducive to diplomatic efforts to resolve the issue (see Table 2).

### Parliamentary diplomacy with North Korea

Parliamentary diplomacy has been instrumental in reducing the diplomatic isolation that hinders international efforts to achieve a peaceful and lasting resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. It has been utilised by the United States, the European Union (including individual member states), and various South-East Asian states (see Table 1).

In the case of the United States, bilateral diplomacy usually occurs through the offices of the North Korean Ambassador to the United Nations, based in New York. Apart from this, there are also limited communication channels through embassies in third countries, military talks at the United Nations Command along the De-

Table 1: Parliamentary Delegation Visits to North Korea 1997–2007

United States	European Union	ASEAN 5		Australia*
1998 January	1998 December	1997 March	Thailand	1999 May
2001 August	2000 September	2000 September	Philippines	2000 May
2003 June	2004 February	2001 November	Indonesia	
2005 January	2005 July	2002 June	Thailand	
2005 August		2002 August	Thailand	
2005 September		2006 April	Philippines	
		2006 September	Indonesia	

\* Non-official visits by parliamentarians

Militarized Zone (DMZ) and through multilateral channels such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

Parliamentary diplomacy has at times allowed direct high-level communication to take place, reducing tension and allowing non-committal exploration of means to resolve crises. Since 1997 there have been five congressional delegations to North Korea. Congressional diplomacy has focused on three processes—negotiation, mediation, and investigation.

The European Union (EU)—which maintains diplomatic relations with North Korea, including through the embassies in Pyongyang of Sweden, the United Kingdom and Germany—has also found parliamentary diplomacy to be an effective means of communication. The EU has undertaken four parliamentary visits. In comparison to US congressional visits, European parliamentary visits have not been based on negotiation or mediation, but rather a more standard investigative process to assess the implementation of foreign and aid policies.

The EU has contributed €118million (A\$196.8 million) to the Korea Peninsula Energy Development Organisation (KEDO) since 1996.<sup>3</sup> The KEDO was set up as part of the 1994 Agreed Framework to provide energy relief to North Korea. The EU has also contributed €344 million (A\$557.2 million) in humanitarian aid since 1995.<sup>4</sup> These contributions are in addition to bilateral contributions made by member states of the EU. Investigating the effectiveness of aid and the implementation of agreements to which funds have been committed is an essential role of parliamentary diplomacy.

In addition to delegations from the European Parliament, parliamentary delegations from individual EU member states, including the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy and Belgium, have also been undertaken. There have also been numerous non-official visits by European

parliamentarians.

Regional states have also used parliamentary diplomacy to further relations with North Korea. Parliamentarians from Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia have undertaken both official and non-official parliamentary visits.

### The advantages of parliamentary diplomacy

Parliamentary diplomacy can supplement traditional diplomacy and enhance its effectiveness. Its specific advantages include:

- **Access.** Parliamentarians, given their position, are often able to obtain direct access to decision-makers in the countries they visit.
- **Trust.** In the majority of cases parliamentarians are elected representatives. They therefore hold greater authority as representatives of the people. In comparison, diplomats, being representatives of the government, can be viewed as distanced from public sentiment.
- **Flexibility.** Given their status as elected officials, parliamentarians also have greater flexibility to explore alternative and innovative solutions to international problems outside the policy space of government employees. They are also more able to engage non-government organisations (NGOs) to contribute to their efforts.
- **Non-committal exploration.** Parliamentarians can be used by a government to undertake non-committal exploration of international problems. This allows governments to harness the flexibility, trust and access of parliamentary diplomacy without appearing committed to the option domestically or internationally.

**Table 2: Nuclear issues timeline**

Oct 2002	The US alleges that North Korea admitted to a secret nuclear-arms program based on highly-enriched uranium.
Nov 2002	The US halts oil shipments to North Korea. Under the 1994 Agreed Framework, the US had agreed to provide oil and to construct light-water reactors in return for the dismantlement of the North Korean nuclear program.
Dec 2002	North Korea starts removing International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring devices on nuclear facilities and expels IAEA inspectors.
Jan 2003	North Korea announces withdrawal from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT).
April 2003	North Korea announces that it has started reprocessing spent fuel rods, a process to obtain plutonium for weapons production.
Aug 2003	First Round of Six-Party Talks between North Korea, United States, Russia, Japan, South Korea and China takes place in Beijing.
Sept 2005	North Korea agrees to dismantle its nuclear programs and return to the NPT in return for unspecified aid and a US agreement not to attack the north. The statement is later called into doubt by a North Korean statement that it will not dismantle its nuclear programs until it is supplied with a civilian nuclear reactor.
Oct 2006	North Korea announces its intention to conduct a nuclear test. It carries out its first nuclear test six days later, on 9 October 2006. The UN Security Council imposes weapons and financial sanctions.
Feb 2007	North Korea agrees to commence the dismantlement of its nuclear programs, allow IAEA access and to return to the NPT in return for a comprehensive aid program including: economic, energy and humanitarian assistance; removal of North Korea from the state-sponsors-of-terrorism list; commencement of bilateral talks towards diplomatic normalisation with the United States; and commencement of bilateral talks towards diplomatic normalisation with Japan and settlement of outstanding issues.

Parliamentary diplomacy also has certain advantages in the particular context of Korea. The political system of North Korea and its cultural traditions lend greater effectiveness to parliamentary diplomacy.

Due to the authoritarian nature of the state, some analysts contend that negotiators effectively serve only as buffers to the real decision-makers in North Korea. Accordingly, high-level access afforded through parliamentary diplomacy would presumably enable more direct access to such decision-makers.

Parliamentary diplomacy also provides a certain level of political benefit to the North Korean leadership. The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) is replete with articles noting parliamentary visits. It uses these visits to demonstrate to the internal audience the importance of North Korea in international affairs.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, North Korea generally welcomes such visits.

Finally, despite North Korea's adherence to the ideologies of socialism, *juche* (self reliance) and *songun* (military first), Confucianism still plays a large role in North Korea's culture and society. Confucian political governance is an extension of the Confucian notion of the ideal family life: 'Just as there is the natural authority of the parent, so there is the natural authority of the president ... based on the twin virtues of filial piety and loyalty'.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, parliamentarians, who enjoy the status of community leaders, are accorded a certain degree of privilege in North Korean society. The value of this tendency in terms of diplomatic process was demonstrated by the ability of former US President Jimmy Carter to broker the 1994 Agreed Framework.

### Challenges of parliamentary diplomacy

There are substantial challenges to parliamentarians undertaking a proactive role in international affairs. Critics argue that allowing parliamentarians to play a

diplomatic role goes against the convention of executive authority in foreign affairs. Through law and convention, the most important decisions in foreign affairs, including the declaration of war and the conclusion of treaties, have traditionally been the preserve of the executive authority.<sup>7</sup> Critics argue that a weakening of executive authority may present problems in the formulation and execution of foreign policy, ultimately leading to less effective diplomacy.

It was reported in the US media that Bush Administration officials were uncomfortable with the efforts of US Representative Curt Weldon to visit the DPRK in 2003.<sup>8</sup> It was thought that allowing Weldon to lead a delegation to North Korea could weaken efforts to isolate the state.

A closely-related criticism is that allowing parliamentarians to play a diplomatic role on the international stage can weaken their home government's position, because it suggests that there is no unified position on the issue being negotiated. This becomes a significant issue during periods of foreign-policy crisis, such as in the prelude to armed conflict.

There are also more practical challenges to parliamentary diplomacy. Budget constraints limit the extent to which parliamentarians can undertake international advocacy. This is particularly relevant for minor-party and independent parliamentarians. The electorate can also, in certain circumstances, view parliamentary delegations with substantial scepticism. Delegations and study tours are often described as 'junkets' in the mass media and can result in substantial negative media coverage for individual parliamentarians.

### Australia–North Korea relations

Stability in the East Asian region is vital to Australia. In 2005–06, East Asia included Australia's top-three merchandise export destinations of Japan, China and South

**Table 3: Australia–North Korea relations**

19 September 1995	Australia joins the Korea Peninsula Energy Development Organisation (KEDO), set up under the 1994 Agreed Framework to provide energy assistance to North Korea.
1–4 May 1999	Senator Gareth Evans and Kevin Rudd MP visit Pyongyang.
27 September 1999	Foreign Minister Alexander Downer meets North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun.
8 May 2000	Australia and North Korea resume diplomatic relations.
14–16 November 2000	Foreign Minister Alexander Downer visits North Korea.
28–30 June 2001	North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun visits Australia.
May 2002	North Korean Embassy opens in Canberra.
2 May 2003	Australia expresses concern to North Korean Ambassador regarding the seizure by Australian authorities of 125 kg of heroin from a North Korean-manned vessel, the MV <i>Pong-Su</i> .
17–18 August 2004	Foreign Minister Downer visits Pyongyang, meeting with President of the Supreme Peoples' Assembly, Kim Yong-nam, and Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun.
19 September 2006	Australia implements sanctions against 12 companies and one individual connected with financing North Korean development of nuclear and other weapons-of-mass-destruction programs.
10 October 2006	Foreign Minister Downer condemns the 9 October 2006 nuclear test, and announces additional visa restrictions on North Korean nationals, with limited exceptions.
16 October 2006	Foreign Minister Downer announces Australian port ban on North Korean-flagged vessels.

Source: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Korea.<sup>9</sup> As noted by Foreign Minister Downer, 'any deterioration in the security situation on the Korean peninsula would have disastrous consequences for Australia's economy, and cause a tremendous loss of jobs and obviously add to instability in the region'.<sup>10</sup> Australia has also made significant contributions to international efforts to address the North Korean nuclear issues. It has contributed \$22 million to the KEDO and \$57 million in aid to North Korea since 1996.<sup>11</sup> Despite this, there have been no official Australian parliamentary visits to North Korea since 1996.

Australia maintains diplomatic relations with North Korea through the accreditation of the Australian Ambassador to the People's Republic of China, as a non-resident Ambassador, based in Beijing (see Table 3). However, the fact that Australia has diplomatic relations with North Korea at all is in part attributable to parliamentary diplomacy.

In May 1999, Kevin Rudd MP and Senator Gareth Evans visited Pyongyang on an Australian Labor Party delegation. A request for humanitarian aid was made, which was subsequently communicated to the Australian Government, ultimately resulting in an increase in humanitarian aid.<sup>12</sup> It can be reasonably assumed that this visit also encouraged efforts on both sides to take steps toward the resumption of diplomatic relations. The delegation allowed non-committal interaction at a high level between representatives.

In September 1999, Foreign Minister Downer met with North Korean Foreign Minister Paek in New York. This was followed by a senior officials' meeting in Pyongyang in February 2000. Ultimately, in May 2000, Foreign Minister Downer announced that diplomatic relations would be resumed.<sup>13</sup>

On 14 February 2007 Foreign Minister Downer stated that, as a result of the deal reached at the Six-Party Talks, Australia might be in a position to offer direct assistance in support of the agreement, particularly in the area of energy and safeguards expertise.<sup>14</sup> As noted, Australia has in the recent past provided substantial humanitarian aid. On 27 April 2007 it was announced that Australia would provide \$1.5 million through the World Food Program (WFP), \$1.5 million for water and sanitation through UNICEF, \$467 000 for emergency health and essential medicines through the World Health Organization (WHO), and \$500 000 for disaster management, water supply and sanitation through the Red Cross.<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion, there are two key roles for the Australian Parliament in relation to North Korea. Firstly, the Parliament has a role in ensuring that Australian contributions of humanitarian aid reach the intended targets. Humanitarian aid to North Korea has become a controversial topic, with limitations on the monitoring of aid leading to fears that it may have been diverted to the military and/or the black market.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Australian Parliament, through its credibility as a representative body and its ability to gain high-level access, has an important diplomatic role in developing trust and encouraging the integration of North Korea into the global community. An Australian Parliamentary delegation to North Korea could complement Australian diplomatic efforts towards

achieving a peaceful and lasting resolution to the North Korean nuclear issue.

1. Young-Hoon Lee, 'An analysis of the effects of North Korea's international and inter-Korean trade on its economic growth', *Economic Papers*, vol. 8, no. 1, Institute for Monetary and Economic Research, Bank of Korea, 2005.
2. B.C. Koh, 'North Korea 1976: Under stress', *Asian Survey*, vol. 17, no. 1, January 1977.
3. European Commission, 'The EU's relations with the DPRK', [http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external\\_relations/north\\_korea/intro/](http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/north_korea/intro/), accessed on 9 February 2007.
4. *ibid.*
5. Carol Medlicott, 'Symbol and sovereignty in North Korea', *SAIS Review*, vol. XXV, no. 2, Summer 2005, p. 74.
6. Chong-Min Park and Doh-Chull Shin, 'Do Asian values deter popular support for democracy? The case of South Korea', National Taiwan University, *Working Paper Series*, No. 26, Taipei, 2004.
7. Brian Hocking, 'Parliament, parliamentarians and foreign affairs', *Australian Outlook*, vol. 30, no. 2, August 1976, p. 282.
8. Michael Cowley, 'Bombs away', *The New Republic*, 1 September 2003, pp. 14–17.
9. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *2005-06 Composition of Trade Australia*, November 2006.
10. Hon. Alexander Downer, transcript of doorstep, Sydney Airport, 30 January 2004.
11. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Democratic People's Republic of Korea—Country brief—May 2007', [http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/dprk/dprk\\_brief.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/dprk/dprk_brief.html), accessed on 9 February 2007.
12. Kevin Rudd, M.P., transcript of doorstep, Melbourne, 20 September 2005.
13. Hon. Alexander Downer, *Diplomatic relations with Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, media release, 8 May 2000.
14. Hon. Alexander Downer, 'Answer to a question without notice: North Korea', House of Representatives, *Debates*, 14 February 2007, pp. 84–5.
15. AUSAID, *Australia provides humanitarian assistance to North Korea*, media release, 27 April 2007.
16. Mark Manyin and Ryun Jun, 'U.S. Assistance to North Korea', Congressional Research Service, Washington, 17 March 2003.

**Jeffrey Robertson**  
**Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Section**  
**Parliamentary Library**

© Copyright Commonwealth of Australia

This work is copyright. Except to the extent of uses permitted by the *Copyright Act 1968*, no person may reproduce or transmit any part of this work by any process without the prior written consent of the Parliamentary Librarian. This requirement does not apply to members of the Parliament of Australia acting in the course of their official duties.

This work has been prepared to support the work of the Australian Parliament using information available at the time of production. The views expressed do not reflect an official position of the Parliamentary Library, nor do they constitute professional legal opinion.

Feedback is welcome and may be provided to: [web.library@aph.gov.au](mailto:web.library@aph.gov.au). Any concerns or complaints should be directed to the Parliamentary Librarian. Parliamentary Library staff are available to discuss the contents of publications with Senators and Members and their staff. To access this service, clients may contact the author or the Library's Central Entry Point for referral.