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## North Korea's only talking head loves the US

By Jeremy Kirk

SEOUL - Meet Kim Myong-chol, perhaps North Korea's only avid and available talking head for one of the world's most mysterious regimes. This very unofficial diplomat is a short, graying, gregarious man of 60 who lives in Japan, talks non-stop and rapid-fire and prefers the United States to Japan, where he now lives. Of course, he loves North Korea, and his mission is to try to educate the world about the Pyongyang government, but he does so - despite his pointed messages - in a tactful, friendly manner, not as a shrill, angry polemicist who alienates his audience.



"When I go to Pyongyang, I am spokesman for America," the engaging Kim told Asia Times Online with a laugh. "But in Washington, I am a spokesman for North Korea." His business cards show US and North Korean flags. Some people call him a traitor.

He agreed to be interviewed by Asia Times Online both in person in Japan and by e-mail from Seoul. Kim speaks in heavily accented English and has an impressive vocabulary. His writing in English on foreign-policy issues is nearly flawless. He pens papers and books in Korean, Japanese and English, attempting to educate the world that he says does not understand Pyongyang.

Kim said he feels more comfortable in the United States than in Japan, though he did not expand beyond saying that he likes the people and has quite a few friends among US military officers, scholars and university professors. He has no problems with Americans as people - it's the government policies on the Korean Peninsula and North Asia that he objects to.

Kim frequently delivers sharp messages about the correctness of North Korean policy and what he calls benighted US policy. But he's no clone of the North's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). He views politics as distinct from people and enjoys engaging the press and pundits on North Korean theory. He has an intimate knowledge of Korean culture and history and how it relates to the current political atmosphere with both Japan and the US.

Kim travels to the US several times a year, giving talks and speeches at universities and think-tanks about North Korea.

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As for his statements about foreign policy, Kim said that North Korea's seemingly warm reception to six-party nuclear talks after a US congressional visit last week does not mean its leaders have budged on their core agenda: a peace treaty with the United States and the lifting of economic sanctions.

"The North Koreans have been knocking on the door for more than 30 years since they made their first proposal for Pyongyang-Washington talks to discuss a peace treaty," said Kim, an ethnic Korean who says he has close ties with the Pyongyang regime. "Their policy goal remains unchanged. They will display great patience, waiting for another 100 years."

The six-party talks with North Korea, which include the United States, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan, have not resulted in an agreement since they started in August 2003. North Korea indicated in November to US officials in New York that it would be receptive to more talks but it did not propose a schedule. The talks are aimed at persuading North Korea to abandon its nuclear-weapons program.

But the strongest positive signals about the talks came last week after the return from Pyongyang of a delegation led by Republican Representative Curt Weldon of Pennsylvania, senior member of the House Armed Services Committee. The entourage met with Kim Yong-yam, second in charge after leader Kim Jong-il, and they held talks with the country's foreign minister and vice foreign minister.

"Obviously the congressional delegation's visit has gone well," Kim Myong-chol said. "They will be welcome back in Pyongyang. Weldon is much more reliable than [US President George W] Bush or [Secretary of State Colin] Powell. He has a very good program. However, what matters in the eyes of Kim Jong-il and his policymakers is what the White House says and does. The legislative branch is important as well."

Although he holds Japanese citizenship and lives in Japan, Kim is firmly Korean, attracted to North Korea because of its policy of self-reliance and independence from the outside world. "Why do I like North Korea? Its political will to be independent from all foreigners - from China, from Russia - this is a point that attracts me," Kim said. "Which is better, hungry wolf or fat dog?"

Kim said his writings have been designated as required reading by Kim Jong-il. He said he received a doctoral degree in political science from North Korea's National Degree Examination Commission in 2001.

What North Korea wants to see is an attitude change from the United States, Kim said.

"Unless the second-term administration by George W Bush offers to end the US policy of hostility in a complete and irreversible way, the Kim Jong-il government will never give up its nuclear deterrence," Kim said. "In the meantime, the North Koreans are ready for talks on simultaneous coordinated piecemeal actions, while increasing its nuclear capability."

Kim is not without critics who question his connections with the North Korean regime. He admits he's at odds with the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, a pro-Pyongyang group, a relationship he said was strained by the fame he claims

he has received because of his writings.

"They told Pyongyang I was a pro-American agent, a traitor," Kim said.

The animated, garrulous writer recently summed up his mission by holding a soy-sauce bottle: "Americans and Japanese only look this way" at North Korea, he said, pointing to one side of the bottle, adding that he shows all sides.

Kim, who is the executive director of his own organization, the Center for Korean-American Peace, which he founded in 1999, does offer a colorful, impassioned perspective on North Korea and how the country deals with the outside world. Kim says that to make progress on the nuclear issue, the United States must sign a peace treaty with North Korea, officially ending the 51-year-old armistice agreement.

The United States has shunned North Korea's bid for a bilateral peace treaty with Washington, seeing it as a move by Pyongyang to splinter ties with allied countries who participated in the 1950-53 Korean War. "From the North Korean point of view, unless America is willing to concede on that point, North Korea has no reason to give up nuclear deterrence," Kim said.

Kim scoffed at the widely quoted US Central Intelligence Agency estimate that North Korea may have one or two functioning nuclear weapons. He said the country has between 100 and 300 weapons based on a nuclear program active since the 1960s. He maintains that it was North Korea that aided Pakistan with its program.

Nuclear weapons, Kim says, are the only way for a small country such as North Korea to balance the scale against the United States. Nuclear weapons are also cheaper than conventional forces, Kim said: an army must be fed, and soldiers could be prone to division.

"For the moment, North Korea sees no sense in selling nuclear technology," Kim said. "But as long as America remains hostile, we have every reason to sell whatever we have."

That kind of talk causes US policymakers to bristle: an estranged North Korea aiding terrorist groups with nuclear technology is among the worst imaginable scenarios. Kim Jong-il is unlikely to give up his nuclear card easily even though he wants a peace treaty and diplomatic relations with the United States, Kim Myong-chol asserted.

"Kim Jong-il's goal," his unofficial spokesman said, "is to neutralize or nullify the American military presence."

**Jeremy Kirk** is a freelance writer specializing in Northeast Asia, based in Seoul. He can be reached at [jeremy\\_kirk@hotmail.com](mailto:jeremy_kirk@hotmail.com).

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**Head Office:** Rm 202, Hau Fook Mansion, No. 8 Hau Fook St., Kowloon, Hong Kong

**Thailand Bureau:** 11/13 Petchkasem Road, Hua Hin, Prachuab Kirikhan, Thailand 77110