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Bill Clinton in North Korea: Winners and Losers

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Denny Roy, senior fellow at the East-West Center, explains that the capture of American journalists “by North Korean border guards put the United States in the difficult position of having to make concessions to Pyongyang at a time when American officials are trying to rally the rest of the world to apply pressure toward convincing the North Koreans to abandon their nuclear weapons program.”

Bill Clinton's recent trip to North Korea to bring home imprisoned American journalists Euna Lee and Laura Ling was a welcome end to a frightening ordeal for these women and their families. All Americans can share in their well-publicized jubilation. Beyond this, however, there is little to celebrate.

Everyone understands that North Korea's brutal political system subjugates human rights and dignity to the survival of the ruling regime, and also that many journalists take risks to tell the stories of victims of misgoverned countries such as North Korea. Nevertheless, Lee and Ling's foray into the border area between China and North Korea was a disastrous move.

Their capture by North Korean border guards put the United States in the difficult position of having to make concessions to Pyongyang at a time when American officials are trying to rally the rest of the world to apply pressure toward convincing the North Koreans to abandon their nuclear weapons program. Furthermore, phone contacts and other information confiscated from Lee and Ling have almost certainly led to the arrests and executions of many North Koreans and their family members involved in the clandestine border-crossing network. The hidden and sad fate of these latest victims of Pyongyang's state security apparatus contrasts starkly with the happy ending enjoyed by Lee and Ling.

At the same time, the Lee-Ling case was a propaganda bounty for Kim Jong-il's government. First Pyongyang presented the captives as tangible proof of U.S. hostility toward North Korea. Then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton felt compelled to ask Pyongyang for a pardon on humanitarian grounds, implicitly recognizing the legitimacy of a North Korean judicial process that convicted Lee and Ling of "hostile acts" and sentenced them to 12 years of imprisonment and hard labor.

Most valuable to the Kim regime was the visit by Bill Clinton. In a country where political prestige attaches to individuals more than institutions and carries over

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from top leaders to their close relatives, it is not surprising that the North Koreans treated Bill Clinton as if he was still a top U.S. official, despite the White House's attempts to describe this as a "private visit."

North Korean media portrayed the Clinton mission as an American envoy coming to Pyongyang on bended knees, carrying a "courteous" message from President Obama (which the White House denies), and begging Kim Jong-il to graciously grant the convicts clemency, allowing Kim to demonstrate his benevolence.

This does more than merely reinforce the cult of personality that deifies Kim, to which North Koreans are well accustomed. It also allows Kim's faction to claim that the decision to acquire nuclear weapons has transformed the relationship between North Korea and the United States.

Since the Korean War, the North Korean government has insisted that the United States is looking for an excuse to attack their country. The justification for the nuclear weapons program has been that it is needed to deter the threat of U.S. aggression. Coming less than three months after North Korea's second (and more successful) nuclear test explosion, Clinton's visit suggests that nuclear weapons have earned North Korea respect and security—exactly the opposite of the message Washington has been trying to send Pyongyang.

Many observers have wrongly hailed the Clinton trip as an opportunity to improve relations with North Korea. Washington and Pyongyang are currently at an impasse over the nuclear weapons issue. The American position is that talks cannot resume until North Korea is prepared to negotiate the terms of giving up its nukes. The North Koreans have insisted talks must be on the precondition that they are recognized as a nuclear weapons state.

The Clinton visit was not necessary to open a channel for U.S.-North Korean communication. Such channels are already available, as evidenced by the secret negotiations that preceded the Clinton visit. The problem now is that until one side backs down, there is nothing to talk about after the cheering over the Lee-Ling episode fades away.