

## The Bush Administration's Secret Link to North Korea, Dong Moon (Douglass) Joo

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February 7, 2012

**Communicating with the Hermit Kingdom is never easy, and often requires 'track two' diplomacy. The Bush administration sometimes used an informal envoy with an unusual pedigree.**

It is anyone's guess how negotiations might proceed with North Korea's Kim Jong-un, who inherited his late father's power in December. But if history is any guide, talking to North Korea's government will be a bit like yelling at a barricaded gate. Communicating at all has often required a bizarre and unofficial form of diplomacy and intelligence gathering. These channels between the two adversaries, known as "track two," are usually far more active than formal diplomatic relations. Bill Richardson, former ambassador Donald Gregg, and even ex-president Bill Clinton are some of the well-known examples of those who dealt with the reclusive North Koreans.

One of the "track two" intermediaries, however, turns out to be an unexpected candidate: Douglas Dong-Moon Joo, a 66-year-old businessman, chairman of the *Washington Times* newspaper, and a high-ranking associate of the Unification Church of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon. In the West, the Unification Church is often identified with its mass wedding ceremonies, its wealth, and its unusual theology, which involves the second coming of a messiah whom many of its believers believe to be Moon himself.

Although the editorial stance of its *Washington Times* is right-wing, the Unification Church's corporate arm has significant investments in communist North Korea, including an automobile plant called Pyeonghwa ("Peace") Motors. Factory workers have been assembling cars there since 2002.



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un at the Mangyongdae Revolutionary School at Pyongyang for the lunar New Year in January; inset: Douglas D.M. Joo, KNS, AFP / Getty Images , Inset: Gerald Herbert / AP Photo

In addition to his role at the *Washington Times*, Joo, according to court records, was a member of the board of the Unification Church International, which was set up to "support" church activities.

The Daily Beast has learned that from at least 2003 through 2008, Joo frequently visited North Korea, sometimes functioning as an informal emissary between the Bush administration and the despotic regime of Kim Jong-il.

Joo, who was born in North Korea but lives in the United States, had extraordinary ties at the very top of the North Korean government, and even met with the late President Kim. In Washington, he met with at least four top-level national-security officials during this period, talking to them about what he saw in North Korea: military developments, leading personalities, government trends and diplomacy.

Joo declined to be interviewed for this article, but agreed to respond to questions in writing. He said he had no formal or official role as an envoy, but added, “I have occasionally acted as a kind of interpreter helping to bridge gaps of understanding between the two countries.”

Joo’s venture into private diplomacy seems to have started just a year after President George W. Bush listed North Korea as part of the “Axis of Evil” in 2002. Kim Jong-il didn’t take this designation graciously, and the diplomatic tangles quickly grew impenetrable: within a year, North Korea announced it had been engaged in a secret uranium program. Then, just as Bush was preparing the Iraq invasion, North Korea gave his administration a new headache by pulling out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Kim then lobbed a missile into the Sea of Japan just as Secretary of State Colin Powell was trying to organize talks between North Korea, the United States, and four other countries.

Around this time, Douglas Joo was ushered into the old Executive Office Building next to the White House to meet with officials on the North Korean issue. He surprised staff of the National Security Council with the access he seemed to have in Pyongyang. “Joo had a message from a lieutenant general on the North Korean National Defense Commission,” as one former NSC official remembers. “It was directed at [then–Deputy National Security Adviser Stephen] Hadley and [then–National Security Adviser Condoleezza] Rice.”

Joo delivered a fairly specific, but blustery, private proposal from the North Koreans. “Let us have the nuclear weapons,” is the way one high-level official recalls the message, “and we won’t transfer them to anyone. Drop the sanctions!” The terms were, of course, a nonstarter for the Bush administration, but the contacts showed a desire to communicate. “They were using Doug Joo,” the former official recalls, “to be in contact with us.”

In response, the administration asked Joo to encourage the North Koreans to negotiate with a team of countries, rather than pursue relations solely with the United States.

Joo, of course, was just one of these “track two” intermediaries, but he was one who was able to move back and forth under the media radar. (Joo wrote to The Daily Beast that “I never conveyed any messages from one side to the other, other than general greetings and best regards”; rather, he emphasized that he could “head off misunderstandings by making sure each side’s intention is conveyed respectfully to the other.”)

Donald Gregg, a former ambassador to South Korea and former CIA officer, has made several trips to North Korea and has been an open advocate of closer U.S. engagement. “I view these track-two approaches as important,” he emphasizes.

Evans Revere, a former senior State Department official and a Korea expert, explains that while he knew nothing of Joo, these informal channels are vital for a number of reasons. Government officials on both sides, he says, often “piggyback” on the nongovernmental efforts, opening unexpected opportunities for official dialogue where there was none.

Other former officials weren’t interested in such informal links, in particular when they involved Sun Myung Moon’s group. “The Unification Church has been playing footsie for some time with the North Koreans,” says Stanford University’s David Straub, a former senior foreign-service officer. “And they constantly had people who were trying to report back to us.”

Victor Cha served on the NSC, dealing with North Korea from 2004 and 2007. He dismisses most nongovernmental discussions. “There are lots of people who come through and say they have all these contacts,” he says, “and they have a special message, and the special message is basically the same thing.”

Cha, who is now affiliated with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, says that when he was at the White House he met Joo for coffee and wasn’t impressed. “He just said he knew all these people. He’s met with Kim Jong-il. But I never saw him to be of any policy use to us.”

But Joo’s reach in the Hermit Kingdom was compelling. In 2005 he met privately with the reclusive President Kim—the kind of access that intelligence analysts can only dream of. He wrote to The Daily Beast that the meeting lasted almost four hours and that “it seemed to me, he desperately wanted to have a normalized relationship between North Korea and the U.S.” Joo explained that Kim “tried to establish, through me, how much truth and sincerity was in U.S. proposals to improve relations between the two countries.”

On the U.S. side, former government officials say that Joo met several times with Ambassador Christopher Hill, who led U.S. diplomatic efforts on North Korea at the State Department until 2009. Despite dogged efforts, Hill was unable to strike a deal that would suit both Pyongyang and his hardline colleagues at the Bush White House.

Joo would also meet with Ambassador Joseph DeTrani, who oversaw intelligence about North Korea at the office of the Director of National Intelligence. DeTrani told The Daily Beast he considered Joo “very helpful.” “He’s a patriotic American,” DeTrani emphasized.

One of the more dramatic incidents took place in 2007, when Customs and Border Protection officers at Anchorage International Airport took the newspaper executive aside for questioning. Officials were intrigued, former agents say, because of some documents he had in his luggage. Soon the Federal Bureau of Investigation was involved. Joo’s briefcase was taken. A former U.S. official says Joo even complained to his State Department contacts.

In his statement to The Daily Beast, Joo wrote that “I was once questioned by the FBI upon re-entry to the U.S. from South Korea through the Anchorage airport.”

He says that officers found a South Korean newspaper in his luggage, with a picture of North Korea's president on it, which he says was what raised their suspicion initially.

For a time, in any case, Joo had his own crisis, because in 2009 he was temporarily ousted from his job at the *Washington Times*. It was part of a messy fight within the Unification Church.

Now back at the paper, Joo says he has had no connections with the Obama administration. He reportedly visited North Korea to pay his respects after the death of Kim Jong-il.

But track-two diplomacy, with new intermediaries, has been one of the tools Obama has used quite heavily in dealing with North Korea, and Revere, the former diplomat, says two private groups are getting ready to engage the new regime in Pyongyang.

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