

JAMES CLAPPER'S DYSTOPIAN NOVEL ABOUT NORTH KOREA'S HACK

I noted the other day how centrally James Clapper foregrounded his recent trip to North Korea in his discussion of the alleged North Korean hack of Sony. Now that the transcript is up, I see the trip was even more central in his discussion than reports had indicated. After noting that Jim Comey (whom he called “the senior expert on the investigative side of cybersecurity”) and Admiral Mike Rogers (whom he called “the senior expert on how cybersecurity ops actually happen”) would say more in following speeches, Clapper launched into a description of his trip, as if it were central to the discussion of the hack.

I’m not an expert on cyber. I guess that’s a way of saying I’m going to refer technical questions to the real experts here.

So, I was trying to think through what my contribution to this conference could possibly be. Well, I recently traveled to North Korea (and back, happily). So I thought I’d talk about that. [delayed laughter]

Yes, that’s a joke. [laughter] I learned from Father McShane that this crowd needs cuing. [laughter, applause]

I’ll talk about that and how it applies to this week’s conversation about cyber, given the Sony hack.

The first question I always get about the trip is: “Why you?” As in, “Why on earth would we send the DNI, the director of national intelligence, especially this DNI, on a diplomatic

mission to get two American citizens who were imprisoned in North Korea?"

Why would they send me? The truth is, the mission had been in the works for quite a while.

I find it interesting that Clapper described such a lead-up to the meeting. At the time, it was much more closely tied to the October 21 release of Jeffrey Fowle (though that, too, could have been in the works for months).

North Korea wanted an active member of the National Security Council and a cabinet level official to come and to bring a letter from President Obama.

Note Clapper describes North Korea's goal was that he "bring a letter" from President Obama. I find that notable given the reporting at the time about that letter – and Clapper's unwillingness to read it during his press blitz about it.

The White House knows I've had a long history of working Korean issues, since I served as chief of intelligence for U.S. Forces in Korea in the mid-'80s. So the White House put my name forward to the DPRK, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as they call themselves, government in Pyongyang. And I think we were all surprised, to include me, when they agreed. That's how and why I was picked to go.

Actually, I thought the New York Times had a better explanation: Clapper is "Gruff, blunt-speaking and seen by many as a throwback to the Cold War."
[laughter]

"An unlikely diplomat, but perfect for the North Koreans." [laughter]

Clapper is adopting the NYT's description to

pitch this as a Cold War, even though reporting at the time suggested relations with North Korea might be improving.

That's the nicest thing the New York Times has ever written about me.
[laughter, applause]

After that jokey beginning, Clapper took a long diversion to talk about how to prevent hacks and to provide some characterization of our adversaries online. Which brought him back to his discussion of the alleged North Korea hack, presented in contradistinction to what Clapper claimed was China's objective – to break into networks to steal data that would allow it to surpass the US economically (which I don't believe fully describes their motives or their actions).

That's China's primary motivation: to catch up to and then surpass Western industrial and defense capabilities and to eventually pass by the U.S. economy.

From there, Clapper claims, dubiously, that the Sony hack was the most damaging hack in the US, presenting it as stemming from an "entirely different philosophy" than he ascribes to China.

The Chinese are focused on those goals; whereas the recent cyber attack from North Korea, which by the way is the most serious cyber attack ever made against U.S. interests with potentially hundreds-of-millions of dollars and counting in damages, was driven by an entirely different philosophy.

He then launches into his own representation of North Korea as the quintessential totalitarian society, where people do mundane, labor-intensive jobs (which could be said about many countries) and where people "don't show any emotion," where they don't even converse or laugh.

So, back to the weekend trip I took, which was exactly two months ago today. We flew into Pyongyang, the capital city, on Friday evening, the seventh of November. And the first thing that struck me was just how dark the city and airport were, just completely dark. We damaged a tire on the plane while taxiing in the dark, because of the poor construction of the taxiways and runways at Sunan airport.

Then, when I saw the city on Saturday, I was expecting to see drab clothes and lack of modern tools, people walking to get around, people sweeping and doing similar, mundane, labor-intensive jobs. And those expectations were met, from what I saw of Pyongyang. But I was also struck by how impassive everyone was. They didn't show any emotion. They didn't stop to greet each other, didn't nod hello, and we didn't see anyone conversing or laughing. They were just going about their business, going wherever they were going. It was almost automaton like. It was eerie.

This is James Clapper the dystopian novelist, depicting what he saw in less than 24 hours of being exposed to those whom North Korea permitted to be exposed to America's top spy.

Which Clapper then contrasts with the pleasure enjoyed by North Korea's Generals (I'm curious how recently Clapper has considered how our menial labors' public lives would contrast with top Generals' festive dinners?).

And the plight of the citizens of Pyongyang stood in solemn contrast to the dinner I had the previous night, Friday the seventh, an elaborate 12-course Korean meal. Having spent time in Korea, I consider myself somewhat a connoisseur of Korean food, and that was one of the best Korean meals I've ever had. Unfortunately, the company was not

pleasurable.

Without any explanation of why he'd be meeting with the guy in charge of cyber operations to free two Americans and not the head of North Korea's counterintelligence organization, Clapper describes his host as that guy, the North Korean equivalent of Admiral Rogers.

My dinner host was General Kim, the four-star general in charge of the Reconnaissance General Bureau, the RGB, the organization later responsible for overseeing the attack against Sony.

Reporting on this all described General Kim's full name, Kim Young Chol, though at least according to this, Clapper did not use it.

The RGB is an amalgam of special operations and intelligence resources. They do overseas collection, reconnaissance, and importantly, cyber operations.

General Kim claimed to me that he was my North Korean counterpart. He was just a couple years younger than I, and we had to communicate through a translator, a North Korean who spoke flawless English but with a British accent that was pretty strange. [laughter]

I find it interesting that a guy who has just described his history in Korean intelligence is relying on North Korea's translator, not an American one. I'm also less interested in the English accent this guy had than how accurately he translated Clapper's own comments.

General Kim spent most of the meal berating me about American aggression and what terrible people we were. He said that North Korea was under siege by its closest neighbors, who were supported, aided, and abetted by the

United States. He got louder and louder, and he kept leaning toward me, pointing his finger at my chest and saying that U.S. and South Korean exercises were a provocation to war.

And not being a diplomat, my reaction was to lean back across the table, point my finger at his chest, [laughter] and respond that shelling South Korean islands wasn't the most diplomatic course of action they could have taken either. [laughter] This kind of connoted the entire evening's conversation. [laughter and applause]

Note that, up until this point in the account of his trip (as opposed to the lead-in), Clapper has not mentioned the ostensible goal of freeing the two Americans. But now he does.

But of course, my purpose was to secure the release of our two citizens. So at one point, my executive assistant suggested I take a head break to let things cool off, which I did.

I guess I have to give the New York Times credit, "Gruff and blunt-speaking" aren't too far off. [laughter] I'm not sure I was "perfect for the North Koreans," though.

At the end of the evening, I presented General Kim with a letter from President Obama. The letter didn't say much, except to designate me as his envoy, and that releasing our two citizens would be viewed as a positive gesture.

Again, as with contemporaneous reporting, Clapper doesn't reveal what North Korean might have expected to be different about this letter.

Saturday, the next day, was nerve wracking. We weren't sure, (I wasn't at least), whether we were going to get our

two citizens back or not. So we stayed around the state guesthouse all morning.

About 11:00 in the morning, Saturday, an emissary from the minister of state security showed up to announce that the DPRK government had demoted me. They no longer considered me the President's envoy, and accordingly, they couldn't guarantee my safety and security in the city of Pyongyang. He said the citizens of Pyongyang were aware and my purpose was to secure the release of our two "criminals."

Thanks. [laughter]

So we waited around and waited around. It's not like you can hail a cab and go ride around. We were under their control.

About 3:00 that afternoon, this same emissary from the minister of state security came back and said: You've got 20 minutes to hustle together your luggage and check out of this place. We're leaving.

We went in the vehicles to downtown Pyongyang, and we were ushered into a conference room there, and sat through an interesting "amnesty-granting ceremony," I guess I'd call it, in which the minister of state security read a proclamation from Kim Jong Un, the Supreme Leader .

That was the first time I'd seen our two citizens, who were still in their prison garb.

Curious observation Clapper felt the need to make – "that was the first time he'd seen" the two Americans. Why would anyone think differently?

They were turned over to us. We got them a change of clothes, out to the

vehicles, and back to the airport. I can't recall a time when an aircraft with "United States of America" emblazoned across it ever looked as good. [laughter]

The next day, really our second Saturday after we crossed the date line, we landed at McChord Air Force Base, near Seattle. I went up to the cockpit and watched the two family reunions, which were very gratifying and very emotional, and at that moment, it was all worth it to me.

Thus far, none of this elucidates anything about North Korea's motive – unless, of course, there's more to that letter and North Korea's dashed expectations regarding the meeting. Clapper finally gets around to what he claims is motive here.

Okay, I want to bring this story back to cyber. I think it's important to note that the general I had dinner with that first night, General Kim, is the director of the RGB. He's the guy who ultimately would have to okay the cyber attack against Sony, and he really is illustrative of the people we're dealing with in the cyber realm in North Korea.

All of that vitriol he spewed in my direction over dinner was real. They really do believe that they're constantly under siege from all directions. Painting us as an enemy that's about to invade their country any day now is one of the chief propaganda elements that's held North Korea together for the past 60 years.

Maybe it's the 28,000 or more Americans deployed on the border for the past 60 years?

And they are deadly serious about affronts to the Supreme Leader, whom

they consider to be a deity.

Or maybe it's that the US really has engaged in discussions of regime change?

I watched The Interview over the weekend, and it's obvious to me that the North Koreans don't have a sense of humor. [laughter and applause]

Hardeharharhar. US authorities find it equally amusing when right wingers talk about assassinating President Obama. Oh wait. No. They take that pretty seriously, as they should.

The DPRK is a family-owned country. It's been that way ever since it was founded in the '40s. And there's no room for dissent, not when the favorite management technique of their leader is public executions. It's "super effective" as a management tool. [laughter]

Now, at the very end of James Clapper's dystopian novel, we actually get to motive – which isn't, in the end, all that different from the motive Clapper ascribes to China, except that we have to take China's aspirations to world power much more seriously.

Behind all of this, North Korea wants to be recognized as a world power. They see nuclear weapons as their insurance policy and ticket to survival, and the rest of their society, including their conventional military forces, suffers for it. But cyber is a powerful new realm for them, where they believe they can exert maximum influence at minimum cost, and this recent episode with Sony has shown that they can get recognition for their cyber capabilities.

James Clapper spent 1,350 words of his discussion on North Korean spinning his

dystopian novel about how the Sony hack is about a perceived insult (or real threat of assassination, or regime change) and the guy running North Korea's external intelligence organization is as brusque as he himself is. He spent about 75 words explaining that North Korea sees cyberattacks as a realm in which they can exercise maximal influence at the lowest cost (admittedly, perhaps Clapper thinks the North Koreans were just aiming to influence us to stop treating regime change of their leader as an acceptable laughing matter).

I raise all this not just because it's so fun to do close analysis of the dystopian novel James Clapper tells about his trip to North Korea. But for two other reasons.

First, underlying it all seems to be a lot more tension about North Korea's expectations for that meeting than anyone has made out. James Clapper wants to tell a story about it, but there are clear spots where his story suggests there is more there. And while it's clear the initial probes on the hack had already started by the time of the Clapper meeting, I do find the way the hack followed on Clapper's meeting notable.

And considering those expectations in conjunction with a consideration of whether North Korea has a legitimate reason to be worried – in the wake of Saddam Hussein and Moammar Qaddafi's executions, as well as our thus far ineffective efforts to take out Bashar al-Assad – seem to provide a more plausible explanation (though, in my opinion, still not entirely compelling) for why North Korea would strike out at a Japanese-US target just weeks after Clapper's trip.

That still doesn't necessarily mean North Korean did the hack (or how the hack would really make it less likely the US would try to carry out regime change). But I do think it a worthy question.