

When Bill went to Pyongyang



It was not long ago that the world had written him off as an ageing leader with little or no remaining grip on power. But Bill Clinton is back. So it seems is the other dear leader, Kim Jong-il. For a man who had just a few weeks ago been declared terminally ill – one Japanese academic had even claimed he was dead – North Korea's dictator is looking quite sprightly.

The extraordinary photographs showing him flanked by a former US president (doing his best to imitate a sphinx) and several former US officials are a propaganda coup. They will without any doubt be used to shore up his position at home and secure his ability to confer succession upon his third son, Kim Jong-woon, still in his 20s.

Unlike in the dying days of the Clinton administration, when the former president was desperate to strike a last-minute deal with Pyongyang, Mr Kim's regime is now the proud owner of a nuclear bomb.

It is clear what Mr Kim has gained. But what, if anything, has the US achieved apart, of course, from the release of two American journalists facing 12 years of hard labour? Barack Obama has sought to portray Mr Clinton's visit as purely private. That is not credible, particularly given the former president's relationship to Hillary Clinton, secretary of state. In more than three hours of discussions with Mr Kim, Mr Clinton must have strayed beyond idle chit-chat. It can only be hoped he sought to discover what is North Korea's negotiating bottom line and what, if anything, could persuade it to part company with its nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately, the answer to that question is probably nothing. While the Bush administration was searching Iraq for imaginary weapons of mass destruction, Pyongyang was busy building real ones. The most that may now be achievable is to get it to freeze its programme and to sign verifiable agreements not to hawk its technology to others.

On balance, the US is right to have made this imaginative and unconventional approach. But neither Washington nor anyone else should be blind to the dangers of North Korean blackmail. Mr Kim has used the arrest of two journalists to secure the bilateral meeting he craved, albeit with the head of a former administration. Next, he will be after money and supplies. Washington must decide what it can realistically demand of Pyongyang in terms of nuclear commitments. Then it should stick to that position and not budge one iota until North Korea complies.

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