NORTH KOREA: A French diplomat on the frontlines in Pyongyang

Olivier Vaysset talks running the French Cooperation Office in the DPRK from 2011-13

By Hamish Macdonald

NK News.org (08.06.2018) – https://bit.ly/2sHLbHL – In October of 2011, the French Cooperation Office began operating in Pyongyang, North Korea. While maintaining that it had no diplomatic relations with the DPRK, Paris sent diplomat Olivier Vaysset to run the office.

Vaysset, a diplomat with previous postings in Angola, Laos, Japan, Burma, Taiwan and Singapore, was in the country between October 9 2011 and November 1 2013.

The period represented a critical time for the DPRK. Just one month after Vaysset’s arrival North Korea announced that its then-leader – Kim Jong Il – had passed away, with currently leader Kim Jong Un ascending to power.

And in February 2013, North Korea also conducted its third underground nuclear test leading to a period of extreme tensions on the peninsula.
Vaysset spoke to NK News about his time and experiences in Pyongyang at this important juncture.

NK News: As head of the French Cooperation Bureau in Pyongyang what was your mission and your day-to-day tasks on the ground in the DPRK?

Olivier Vaysset: I had to set up the office within the German campus in one of the abandoned spaces left after German reunification. It took me two years to set up an operational office sufficient to our diplomatic work, with the help of the North Korean authorities.

At the same time, I had to follow the political and security situation in the Korean peninsula, to manage our bilateral academic and linguistic cooperation and our cultural and research cooperation and, finally, for the priority missions, to monitor the action of French NGOs and that of EU food aid in coordination with UN agencies, and to relay France’s serious concerns about the human rights situation.

Other missions included conveying to the North Korean authorities France’s commitment to press Pyongyang to scale down its nuclear and ballistic programs and analyzing the Party rhetoric in an attempt to understand the authorities’ policy on this matters.

And, finally, during any visits by French businessmen, to
emphasize the constraints of bilateral economic relations as set forth in UN and European sanctions.

While such tasks hardly constituted a “routine” in such a context, it was important to strive for regularity so as to maintain one’s mental equilibrium while furthering an understanding of one’s environment.

My daily tasks consisted of studying the Party journal with my liaison officer and delving deeper into important topics; reading KCNA, newspapers, magazines and specialized sites about the region; keeping up with UN agency reports; participating in weekly meeting of EU Heads of Mission and the one organized by the WFP.

I also had to read my French colleague’s notes and report back to Paris on the results of my contacts and reading… Not to mention all the administrative work to be done by only two Frenchmen plus a minder and a driver.

NK News: You arrived in Pyongyang at a crucial time – just before Kim Jong Il died. What was the atmosphere like in the city at the time and in 2012 under the new leadership?

Olivier Vaysset: Arriving two and a half months before the sudden death of Kim Jong Il, I felt like I had taken a machine back in time to the post-Korean War years and had to adapt to a past, somewhat static time.
Very quickly the brutal news of the death of the country’s father-mother was followed by the raw expression of pain and anxiety by the population. Nothing surprising when you know the Korean emotional tradition and the grip this one man had on the daily lives of the North Korean people.

Just as brutally, within a few weeks, the population had to rejoice to see the son following the father’s path.

Within a few months, Pyongyang changed its face from cold austerity to a city with new towers, restaurants, cafes, nightclubs, markets and shopping malls. The most impressive thing was the exponential increase in cars — and not the cheapest ones — and the onset of traffic jams, a real challenge for the female traffic officers who had never experienced such a flow of vehicles.

It was a whole new message: you are authorized to flaunt your wealth and enjoy your life in a great city; a city embellished with modern towers, theme parks, ice skating rinks, an aquarium and much more to come. And a promise: you will not have to tighten your belt anymore.

NK News: You were also there in 2013 when tensions were exceptionally high. What was the atmosphere like then and did you get the sense that North Koreans believed there was the danger of conflict starting?

Olivier Vaysset: This was a situation of great confusion due to many factors: a message that was meant to be clear and
imperative did not go well through the foreign ministry. The Ministry of Defense took over to reduce the prospect of a serious conflict. When the authorities said they could not protect us in the event of an imminent conflict, we were advised to leave or to go to distant shelters (but without further details).

The authorities told us that the people’s pursuit of daily activities demonstrated their courage and faith in a final victory. However, Pyongyang’s population had undergone emergency training in case of alerts. Our local contacts seemed to be waiting for clarification and our Chinese and Russian friends were dubious. So the situation in Pyongyang was in sharp contrast with the situation in Seoul, where a number of foreigners had bought plane tickets and packed their bags.

The biggest challenge for the EU Heads of Mission was to lower the pressure coming from our media-fueled capitals; every journalist was so excited to be at the front line of a great conflict… Albeit with no time to report and perhaps no living readers.

NK News: You were posted in the DPRK for over two years. What were the biggest or most significant changes you observed as having occurred throughout your time in the country?

Olivier Vaysset: As I said before, the changing face of Pyongyang. But also a young leader who carried some hope for the people and who wanted to show some kind of modern behavior with his wife and the famous “Moranbong” all-girls band.
Another significant change consisted of the relative relaxation of the Pyongyang citizens even when pushed to do Herculean works for the masses and participation in great festivities remain de rigueur, but something one feels more over time is the general complexification of society following the destructuring of the system caused by the famine: the creation of an autonomous private market, tolerated and repressed according to unknown, ever-changing norms.

NK News: Where you able to travel outside of Pyongyang with any regularity and which locations were you able to visit?

Olivier Vaysset: One doesn’t need permission for a day trip outside Pyongyang, and one can drive one’s own car as far as the western port of Nampo. In 30 minutes by car from home, you will find yourself in another world, somewhere between poverty and very modest means.

I’ve been to all North Korean provinces except for Chagang and Ryanggang. I visited French and German NGO projects and the UN projects. We were invited to go to Rason by train for the inauguration of the section of railway from the Russian border to the port of Rajin. I know the western coast too, where expats go to relax.

I was quite surprised by the number of historical sites and temples which are still standing in some parts of the country. I went down to the DMZ and Kaesong industrial zone and up to Dandong.
NK News: While in Pyongyang, were there strict limits on where you could go around the city? Were you able to access some of the markets there?

Olivier Vaysset: Except for the “forbidden city” and military installations, I was able to walk all over Pyongyang, which I did every weekend to get a feel of the city. One can see small shops and people selling food at their window or in the street. The famous Tongil market is easily accessible – even though you need local currency to buy anything.

All in all, to insist that Pyongyang is only a “showcase” city is to miss a good part of the reality there. It takes time to go beyond the big avenues to perceive and see the view from the ground, literally by the soles of one’s shoes.

NK News: Humanitarian cooperation was a key element of the Bureau’s mission when it was set up. Was the Bureau able to make a positive impact in this area and what were the biggest impediments you observed to better humanitarian conditions in the DPRK?

Olivier Vaysset: Very few NGOs decided to stay under the new strict regulations and tough constraints. They were brought under a new appellation “European Union Program Support Units” (EUPS).

I do not know who gave instructions to the “Korean European
Cooperation Coordination Agency” (KECCA) but she was the voice of the severe obstacles that NGOs face. NGOs, unlike UN agencies, have no political relay to have their voice heard, hence my role to defend and support French NGOs with the help of the Ambassador of Sweden.

“General winter” is another obstacle.

More impediments came from American sanctions. Since 2013, banking channels were regularly disrupted, with humanitarian organizations unable to transfer funds into the country. They also faced delays in procurement, additional requirements for licensing, and ensuring equipment or supplies were not on the sanctions list.

But if political reasons and national pride can explain the North Korean constraints, the political debate in the West seems to me unhealthy and excessive. Some people are ready to let the population die in the name of “humanitarian purity” and bet on a general revolt of a hungry population. And If this scenario doesn’t work then we resort to the nuclear final solution.

Quite seriously, I am impressed by these young Europeans’ commitment who work under such conditions and arrive at highly credible results for the benefit of vulnerable groups. We must trust them.

NK News: What was your sense of how your DPRK counterparts saw their country’s relationship with France? Did they deem it
important to strengthen ties?

Olivier Vaysset: The North Korean authorities welcomed the opening of the French office, which they saw as the last stage before the establishment of formal diplomatic relations. The 1981 visit of future-President Mitterrand to Pyongyang who was received by Kim Il Sung made them believe in a commitment on his part in this direction. Eventually, we were only one of two EU member states to stay away from establishing diplomatic relations.

Other reasons were France’s image as the country of the Revolution and of General de Gaulle, hero of the Resistance to the invader, and France’s policy of national independence, sovereignty and nuclear power. France being a permanent member of the UN Security Council helped too. Hence North Korea’s high expectation of France.

NK News: Amid the diplomatic progress seen since the beginning of 2018, it has been proposed in some quarters that the U.S. could operate a liaison office in Pyongyang as a step towards normalizing U.S.-DPRK ties. Having come from such an office, how would you see such a step taken by the U.S. and does it have the potential – if realized – to have a large impact?

Olivier Vaysset: Difficult to answer, although France did participate in the UN forces during the Korean War. And we authorized a DPRK office in Paris since 1969 more or less integrated within the DPRK mission to UNESCO.
I think it’s essential to be there in order to dispel fantasies and assumptions and to have daily physical contact with the country and its people. One must remain open and work patiently without moralizing or expecting immediate results. Americans would run the risk of exasperating their host and being pushed out.

I would rather see a small U.S. mission for diplomatic and humanitarian tasks with instructions not to try to play smart and not to reject the experiences of their colleagues and foreign aid workers. Modesty would have the most impact.

NK News: For you personally, what was it like residing in Pyongyang? What were the best and worst parts about operating as an expat in North Korea?

Olivier Vaysset: Not having known the USSR under Stalin or the early years of Communist China, it was a unique experience. I am very pleased to have been able to communicate directly or through intermediaries with various North Korean interlocutors and to have shared in ordinary activities with the populace.

I never felt any negative feelings towards myself, unlike my experience in some other countries. I have to thank my foreign colleagues, NGOs and UN workers for that.

The suffering of the people and the (relative) absurdity of the system only make the resilience of the North Koreans even more moving. Such energy brings hope for a slow evolution of the country, particularly with the intelligence and courage of
the women to find practical solutions.

The experience also gave me the opportunity to get a better understanding of myself and to test my own ability to go beyond mere intellectual habits.

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