

Report on the Roundtable Discussion of US-DPRK Relations

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by John Whitaker

Held at the Center for International Strategy Technology and Policy, Georgia Tech Atlanta, Georgia. Chaired by CISTP Director, Dr. John Endicott

Featuring Democratic People's Republic of Korea's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, Song-Ryol Han as special guest speaker

A recent meeting of North Korean officials and former US Security and North-East Asian specialists found that domestic politics, different security perceptions and public image have prevented progress from being made in normalizing US-DPRK relations as well as resolving current issues such as nuclear disarmament and North Korean economic hardship.

Dr. John Endicott, long time North-East Asian Security expert and Director of the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs' Center for International Strategy, Technology and Policy, facilitated the round table discussion held at Georgia Tech's Ivan Allen College on February 19, 2003. The guests of honor were the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, Song-Ryol Han and his Counselor, Songchol Rim. Also in attendance were Gen. Ray Davis (USMC, ret.), Former U.S. Ambassador John Kelly, Adm. William Pendley (USN, ret.), Former Ambassador James Laney and Merrily Baird (CIA, ret.). Also attending were Dr. Fei-ling Wang, Dr. John Garver, Dr. William Hoehn, Dr. William Long, Dr. Han Park, and Young Kim. Staffing and events coordination were provided by Angela Levin, CISTP.

The meeting began with mention of a recent Foreign Affairs article written by Ambassador Laney entitled, "How to deal with North Korea" and the conundrum that the US refuses to talk to North Korea while it implements a nuclear program; and North Korea refuses to talk to the US without written assurance of non-aggression. Since security is the stated need of North Korea, it was suggested that the surrounding powers guarantee the security of the entire peninsula so that North Korea can "power down" its nuclear program. "The field is ripe for unconventional ideas so that a threat is not brought to North Korea nor dishonor to the US."

When asked their opinion on how to resolve the current standoff with North Korea the DPRK representatives stated that the position of their government was that the "US is the only country posing a military threat to North Korea". A bilateral treaty of non-aggression was what the DPRK required to initially move forward. "On the basis of this guarantee, the DPRK is willing to settle all issues." according to Pyongyang.

"A treaty is a non-starter" was the message conveyed by many around the table "because the outcome is non-feasible under any administration." "Japan will not stand

still for a nuclear North Korea" was another. The preferred US first step would be to start by consulting with the surrounding powers, like Japan, before moving forward to a position which would guarantee US security. According to several Americans, the US position called for a multilateral regional security agreement, under which security guarantees of a bilateral nature could be discussed.

DPRK officials replied that North Korea was a small country and therefore needed more security guarantees from the US to feel secure. The unresolved status of the Korean conflict was pointed to by a US participant as the basis for this insecurity and raised the issue of a non-aggression pact to end what the DPRK has seen as an ongoing conflict.

Although the DPRK delegation believed the nuclear issue was created by the US (when it violated the 1994 Agreed Framework by not delivering the heavy oil promised by President Clinton) a US participant responded that the abandonment of the NPT by the DPRK had made things very hard on the Administration. "I don't see any chance of agreement as long as IAEA standards are not met." He went on to stress that the nuclear concerns were not a subsidiary issue but a vital part of any process. Multilateral agreements were also not to be underestimated in influencing US policy, according to this speaker.

Furthermore, as stated by another US discussant, it would be impossible for this or any administration to get a bilateral Non-Aggression Treaty from the U.S. Senate. It would require 67 out of 100 senators to approve such a treaty, about which he commented "there are more than 33 senators that I know of who would object". Pointing out the largely conservative makeup of the current Senate and present mood of the country, he stated that unless the DPRK could change a large number of American minds it would be extremely difficult to obtain their objective. Such an agreement could serve as an opening position for the DPRK but could not be achieved as a goal in and of itself. The North Korean side countered by pointing out that the current US position treated bilateral talks as a "reward for good behavior" rather than as a reasonable solution to the problems facing any two countries.

According to the DPRK government, US actions had unsettled the situation. By referring to the DPRK as part of the "Axis of Evil", targeting them in nuclear attack planning and other military moves, the US had raised fears that North Korea might be the next country targeted after a US-Iraqi War. North Korea feared the DPRK-US military imbalance. Several from the US commented that there was a general view that a war on the Korean peninsula would have only losers and no winners. Several speakers stated that the US government was reacting to the general trend of North Korean actions over the past few years. These included the abrogation of the NPT treaty, the expulsion of IAEA inspectors, the flow of hostile rhetoric against the United States, and the adoption of the unrealistic non-aggression treaty as a policy goal. The result of all these actions was to make it politically impossible for the Administration to negotiate with the DPRK without some sign of goodwill, such as progress on the nuclear issue.

To resolve these issues the concept of a Quadra-Lineal Pact was introduced, by another US discussant, as a possible position both the United States and North Korea could endorse. This would involved a security guarantee by four powers, the US, Japan, China and Russia, that protected both North Korean and South Korean sovereignty as well as including them as participants in the pact. Within such a pact, the US could negotiate with North Korea in such areas as nuclear disarmament, the conclusion of a Korean War Peace Treaty, and the eventual demilitarization of the peninsula. However, the position of the DPRK officials was that these were discussible only if they were first able to initiate talks with the main actor, the United States. The lack of direct communication with the US prevented real resolution in what are seen as essentially bilateral problems.

The economic problems were next on the agenda and were closely intertwined with the question of image. US participants who had recently visited to North Korea spoke of some of the severe problems there. Starvation seemed endemic to the northern half of the peninsula and recent population growth had exasperated this existing problem. Another quandary was the Korean War Armistice, which seemed to keep North Korea in a perpetual state of mobilization while stripping resources from other economic sectors.

The North Korean officials warned of a current opinion, in the Pyongyang government, that the United States was deliberately threatening North Korea to keep it occupied militarily and subsequently poor. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its trade bloc had already damaged the North Korean economy by 10 to 20%. However, trade projects like the free trade zone of Sinuiju and agreements with China were poised to develop this area into a future Hong Kong. Economic and managerial reforms were gradually changing the DPRK into a more competitive nation but realizing these improvements is difficult because mass media only bothers to portray "the DPRK as militaristic and starving". A fully comprehensive approach to media coverage of the country was seen as a necessary forward step.

In support of multilateral economic arrangements it was further suggested, by a US participant, that the US administration would have an easier time selling a North Korean aid package to the US Senate if the US did not fund the enterprise alone. Also, since security and economic development seemed to be parallel issues, another US speaker felt that the exclusion of Japan made little sense in the long term. Other US speakers commented that there was a need for transparency on the part of North Korea. "North Korea needs to do what the Chinese did in the seventies" and use different means to invite people in and give North Korea a positive image. "All countries have poverty, many countries have starvation" and they should not feel embarrassed or tighten controls according to another US speaker. A third US participant stated, "There is a feeling of Alice in Wonderland when it comes to your country" of a mysterious place difficult to penetrate and consequently perceived badly in the press. A way to correct this would be to increase contacts between the US and the DPRK using student exchange programs or to permit US-Korean War veterans to enter the DPRK, thereby allowing them to visit battle sites and to pay homage to their fallen comrades.

The work of the DPRK to help with the military remains identification program was cited as a positive example of engagement. This comment led to talk of beginning a Track II initiative among retired senior military US and DPRK veterans.

The meeting ended with a final observation, that both North and South Korea are proud nations and have to be able to find their own way to peace.

NB: This is not a verbatim review but a general summary.