

Plenary Session 2: Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula

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Summary

This special plenary session focused on foreign and security policies for responding to North Korean provocations, the politics of North Korea's nuclear weapons program, and planning for future scenarios on the Korean Peninsula. The panel included distinguished analysts and practitioners of defense and security policy: Dr. Gary Samore, Special Assistant to the U.S. President on WMD; General Larry Welch (Ret.), former president of the Institute for Defense Analyses; General Burwell B. Bell (Ret.), former Commander, UNC/CFC/USFK; and Dr. Hahm Chaibong, President of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. David Sanger of the New York Times moderated the session.

Dr. Samore presented what he labeled the Obama administration's three principles for dealing with the DPRK. First, there must be no nuclear North Korea as it poses a direct threat to allies and the U.S., destabilizes Asia, and weakens international treaties and regimes. It is thus necessary to achieve complete denuclearization according to Six-party Talks agreements and UN Security Council Resolutions 1718 and 1874. Second, the U.S. will work with allies and partners. This includes coordinating policy to maximize leverage, engaging in military exercises and contingency planning, and upholding sanctions on North Korea. The third principle is "action for action," meaning that governments should respond in kind to North Korea – good for good, bad for bad. Sanctions alone will not work, however. It is necessary to engage North Korea and present opportunities for economic and diplomatic improvements. If North Korea shows sincerity, the U.S. is willing to respond in kind; in the meantime, the priority is to prepare for further provocation and unify allies.

Mr. Sanger asked what lessons North Korea draws from the Indian and Pakistani cases, and why the Obama administration has not taken a tougher line on North Korean enrichment claims. Dr. Samore replied that North Korea may be aiming to hold out until the U.S. accepts its nuclear arsenal, but U.S. relations with India and Pakistan are more positive and strategically important than those with North Korea, and it is unimaginable that Washington would accommodate North Korean nuclear weapons. What is more, Pyongyang decided to pursue nuclear weapons long before drawing any lessons from the current Libyan operations. As for North Korea's enrichment activities, these would be serious violations and will make inspections more difficult because there must be sites other than Yongbyon, but verification is essential in any arms control agreement, and intrusive inspections will be necessary for North Korea.

General Welch discussed two possible types of crisis: economic/political collapse of the DPRK and North Korean military aggression. Both types will raise questions about how reunification should be pursued. The preference in Seoul and abroad is for orderly, peaceful and gradual unification. But as the end of the Cold War and recent unrest in the Middle East and Northern Africa show, it is easier to predict an eventual outcome rather than the timing or path of events. So it is necessary to have detailed contingency plans in place that coordinate international and South Korean actions. The German case can provide insights but not a model since the cases are so different. While planning for unification and future North Korean collapse or conflict, the immediate challenge is dealing with North Korea's current behavior. The problem is a repeating cycle of negotiation, provocation, sanctions, escalation, and negotiation without resolution of the core issues. It is generally better to talk than to fight, but Pyongyang has profited more from negotiations than have international interests for stability and nonproliferation.

General Welch argued that sanctions will not make the DPRK denuclearize, especially as trade between China and North Korea has only increased since the nuclear tests. It is hard to convince the DPRK that nuclear weapons are not in their national interests.

Until those interests are addressed, the DPRK will not denuclearize. At this point, that is far from happening. Meanwhile, contingency planning is needed for dealing with loose nukes, mass migration, and military demobilization. The U.S. should pursue bilateral conversations with China on these matters and point out that the benefits North Korea provides China are going down while the costs are going up.

General Bell emphasized that the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances have standing operating procedures and processes that are very capable of dealing with contingencies. Moreover, a crisis will not be caused by the allies, but current planning is “not your daddy’s crisis management” since hostilities would not just involve a peninsular war, but would risk global expansion. Major powers would immediately get involved and North Korea could possibly strike the U.S. homeland sparking a nuclear war. General Bell said that Pyongyang has outmaneuvered both the U.S. and China to hold the nuclear trigger in a conflict and exercise strategic leverage. In particular, North Korea’s nuclear capabilities limit the U.S. and China’s ability to respond to low-scale DPRK attacks on the ROK. General Bell argued that the U.S. has been too focused on war, energy and diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia to the detriment of working with allies in Asia. He suggested that the U.S. disengage from Iraq and Afghanistan, develop a rapid-response posture to Islamic terrorism, pursue energy independence, and refocus military power toward East Asia. Specifically, the U.S., Japan and ROK need to ramp up missile defense deployment and integration to have as a crisis management tool.

Dr. Hahm argued the North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, following the sinking of the Cheonan, was a game changer for South Korean public opinion. North Koreans are no longer seen as brothers but as a threat to be managed. Dr. Hahm said South Koreans now realize that North Korean bad behavior is not the product of bad policy on the part of Seoul or Washington, but rather reflects bad intentions on the part of Pyongyang. Dr. Hahm described the situation on the Korean Peninsula as “managing a permanent crisis.” In the decades since the end of the Korean War, the 10 years of “sunshine” was an aberration, in part because of South Korean self-deception. Dr. Hahm argued that division and tension is

the norm on the Peninsula and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. This is because North Korea is unlikely to collapse and China – despite a burgeoning economic relationship with the ROK – is unlikely to reduce support for Pyongyang. South Koreans must therefore pursue crisis management without any illusions about North Korea or China.

In the discussion, Dr. Hahm said that Seoul has been unable to steer China away from North Korea because China is too large and the ROK is too dependent on the economic relationship. On the idea of reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on South Korean soil, Dr. Samore said this could only be of symbolic value as a form of political reassurance; the move would have no operational value and would not be helpful in getting China and Russia to take more constructive roles. Dr. Samore said it is up to North Korea to cease provocations and demonstrate good faith because the U.S. and ROK do not want to resume talks just for the sake of talking. He has observed some movement in the North Korean position, citing rhetoric that has gone from “never returning to the Six-party Talks” to “returning if sanctions are lifted” to the current “will return to talks without precondition.”

General Bell argued that U.S. policy has been rather consistent across administrations; he blamed uncoordinated approaches to North Korea on what he called Seoul’s “experiment with Sunshine that didn’t work.” He stressed however, that the U.S. Congress needs to understand how the ROK provides U.S. forces with significant financial support and that South Korea has been a faithful ally and remains strategically important. General Bell concluded that until Kim Jong-il is gone, South Korea, the U.S. and Japan should contain the DPRK and then take another shot at engagement with the next set of leaders in Pyongyang. Mr. Sanger summarized current policy as containing North Korea’s capabilities while withholding recognition of the North as a nuclear power to avoid signaling to other states that nuclear breakout can go unpunished. Dr. Hahm concluded that the goal must be to make the North Korean regime miserable until it changes its behavior.

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Session Sketches