

## [PL2-1] Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula

John Warden

Center for Strategic and International Studies

### Full Summary

The 2<sup>nd</sup> plenary session at the 2011 Asan Plenum focused on Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula. The panel was moderated by Mr. David Sanger, the chief Washington correspondent for the New York Times, and featured presentations by Dr. Gary Samore, Special Assistant to the President for Weapons of Mass Destruction, General Larry Welch, the former president and CEO of the Institute for Defense Analyses, General Burwell Bell, the former commander of U.S. Forces Korea, and Dr. Hahm Chaibong, the president of the Asan Institute.

Dr. Samore began by outlining the three principles that the Obama administration has applied to deal with North Korea. First, North Korea would like the United States to recognize and accept it as a nuclear power, though it continues to pose a direct security threat to the United States and to U.S. allies in the region. North Korea's nuclear and missile programs threaten to undermine stability in East Asia and weaken the global system of treaties and regimes that president Obama wants to strengthen in order to move towards a world without nuclear weapons. Therefore, Samore argued, the United States remains committed to the ultimate objective of complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, including both nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

Second, the United States, according to Samore, is committed to working with its allies and partners in East Asia to address nuclear and missile issues and will require their involvement if progress is to be made. The Obama administration has gone out of its way to consult with allies and to strengthen not only diplomatic leverage, but also military cooperation, such as missile defense co-development with Japan and military exercises with South Korea. The United States recognizes that it must also work with China and Russia. Though each country has slightly different interests, they share an interest in stability, conflict avoidance, and denuclearization of the peninsula. In addition, Samore argued, the broader community must cooperate to implement United Nations Security Council sanctions as North Korea tries to sell military commodities. Working together is essential, as demonstrated by the recent

success of turning back the MV Light, which was likely carrying prohibited materials.

And finally, the United States will continue to match action with action. North Korea must receive good for good and bad for bad. If North Korea carries out provocations or violates United Nations Security Council resolutions, the United States will respond with political isolation and increased sanctions, through both multilateral and unilateral efforts. At the same time, the United States remains open to engaging with the North Koreans if they show that they are committed to more responsible behavior. Sanctions cannot work unless North Korea is offered a path to more prosperity. The United States is willing to resume the Six-party Talks once North Korea has demonstrated that it's ready to improve North-South relations. Until such a breakthrough occurs, however, the United States and South Korea must strengthen defenses and remain vigilant in preparation for future North Korean provocations.

Mr. Sanger followed with a few questions. First, he asked whether North Korea might look at the examples of India and Pakistan and conclude that the United States would eventually accept a nuclear North Korea as well. Samore said he thought that might be the case, as evidenced by North Korea's pursuit of a nuclear capability for over 25 years. However, the difference, he argued, is in terms of the overall relationship. The United States is still technically at war with North Korea, so it's hard to see how the United States would accommodate the country having nuclear weapons. Second, Sanger asked about the change in policy between the Bush administration, which was quite hard-line at the beginning before shifting to a policy of increased engagement with the North, , and Obama administration, which has so far taken a tougher line. Samore said that unless North Korea has resolved its enrichment program there cannot be a solution on the nuclear issue. North Korea's claim of having a nuclear program complicates any potential solution. Sanger followed up, asking whether there was any way the United States would be satisfied without full access to the country. Samore acknowledged that a solution would be difficult and said that a solution must begin with a declaration, and then a mechanism for verifying that. Such a solution will of course be subject to negotiation. The goal is to find an arrangement that satisfies the United States, but is also acceptable to North Korea.

General Welch followed with a fairly pessimistic assessment. He argued that there is a rich menu of possible crises on the peninsula, the two most obvious being 1) the prospect of the economic and political collapse of North Korea; and 2) greatly escalated belligerence with nuclear weapons in the mix. It is also possible that the two scenarios are connected in some way. The two possibilities for reacting are variants of the theme of reunification. The United States preference, the General stated, would be an orderly, peaceful, and gradual reunification, while the alternative would be a more unstable reunification, potentially including North Korean collapse.

While the U.S. analysts good at predicting eventual outcomes, it's bad at predicting timing. In 1985 there were predictions that the Soviet system would bury itself, but no one predicted that it would happen in 1991 or that its demise would be peaceful. More recently, many expected that the regimes in North Africa and the Middle East would collapse, but didn't predict it would happen when it did. The lesson, according to Welch, is that rapid and unpredictable change is more likely than any of our predictions, and we have to be able to deal with it. The United States might be right that the North Korean regime will eventually collapse; it can't say with high confidence when that will occur. The greatest obstacle to orderly unification is the economic disparity between the North and the South, which puts a high premium on planning and preparation.

In the meantime, the United States and the Republic of Korea must find a way to deal with North Korean behavior for the foreseeable future while also planning for the difficulties of eventual Korean unification. General Welch argued that while the United States should continue to talk with North Korea, it should avoid negotiations – in which both sides actually try to resolve issues – until there are signs that the North is serious. In the past, North Korea has used negotiations as a cover for the continued development of its nuclear program.

Unfortunately, according to Welch, there's little hope of immediate progress. Sanctions have had limited impact on the leadership in North Korea and the population is hardship tolerant. Trade with China and the humanitarian response to food problems have undermined the bite of sanctions. It's also clear that Kim Jong-il has calculated, probably correctly, that preserving North Korea's nuclear weapons program is in the country's interest. Until this perception changes, it's difficult to see much progress being made in ending the program.

Following General Welch's opening remarks, Sanger asked about possible preparations for a sudden and violent North Korean collapse and inquired about whether it might be in the interest of the United States to reach an agreement with China on this matter. Welch agreed that it would be valuable to talk to China as long as the discussions focused on discrete problems that could be solved. On certain issues – such as the dismantling of North Korea's army and the disposition of nuclear weapons – the United States and China have mutual agreements and might be able to reach an understanding. Sanger followed up by asking whether there was anything the United States could do to persuade China that denuclearization is more important than stability. Welch said that there is no way to change Chinese perceptions, nor is it surprising that their main motivation is to prevent a collapse. Therefore, a better U.S. tactic could be to tell China that their strategy for producing stability is unsustainable.

General Bell spoke third, discussing the importance of crisis management and the U.S.-ROK

alliance. He emphasized that the two allies, along with Japan, have very formal and effective standard operating procedures for crisis management; however, the situation remains dangerous. According to Bell, the North has outmaneuvered both China and the United States in developing its own nuclear capability. Unfortunately, they think this allows them to conduct provocations short of a major invasion with little fear of initiating a significant confrontation. And if North Korea develops the capacity to hit the U.S. homeland with a nuclear weapon, future crises could quickly escalate globally.

Bell also argued that the political and diplomatic community in the United States needs to refocus its attention on East Asia, and on the Korean peninsula in particular. To manage the crisis effectively, Bell argued, the United States must quickly disengage from unproductive nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan and shift to quick-strike counter-terrorism operations that would enable the U.S. to refocus on East Asia and reenergize its commitment to the region. To effectively deter North Korea, the United States must make clear that any use of a nuclear weapon will immediately result in North Korea's immediate destruction with all elements of military power, including nuclear weapons. If U.S. declaratory policy is successful, it will place the country in a position to diffuse and manage a future crisis. In addition, the United States must work with its allies to create an integrated system of tactical, operational, and regional missile defense capabilities against North Korean missiles. Effective missile defense, according to Bell, can be a most powerful crisis management tool.

Sanger followed with a couple of questions that shifted the discussion to the ways in which South Korean domestic politics might influence the crisis. According to Bell, the South Korean sunshine policy was a mistake. South Korea gave money to the North, hoping to improve relations, but the money was funneled to the military. When the most recent South Korean government was elected, North Korea knew the game was up and adopted a more confrontational policy. In the next South Korean election, Bell argued, we should hope for a government that is skeptical of North Korea and seeks to strengthen South Korea's alliance with the United States.

Dr. Hahm spoke last, arguing that the United States and the Republic of Korea must be prepared to manage a permanent crisis. The collapse of North Korea, as difficult as it might be, could produce favorable results. The problem, according to Hahm, is that if we keep thinking about a distant and uncertain collapse, we get tricked into thinking that the crisis may be over.

According to Dr. Hahm, recent North Korean actions have taught us many important lessons. First, North Korea will not give up its nuclear program and/or weapons anytime soon. In South Korea, he said, the realization is starting to sink in that we might have to live with a

nuclear North Korea. For that reason, extended deterrence and assurance have returned as alliance issues. The ROK government and public are asking for assurance, and there's even talk of South Korea building its own arsenal or having the United States reintroduce tactical nuclear weapons. These are signs, according to Hahm, that South Korea is starting to realize the gravity of the situation.

Second, North Korean nuclear developments are not the result of bad or inconsistent policies by South Korea or the United States. Instead, it's now clear that it's been North Korea's intention all along to develop nuclear weapons. As a result, there have been changes in the debate in South Korea. There's no longer a debate over sunshine vs. hard-line. Instead, there's talk of a stronger alliance with the United States and even some discussions of a military relationship with Japan, something that would have been unimaginable a year or two ago.

Third, China will not side with South Korea, at least on security issues. As a result of the normalization of relations with China in 1992 and the growth in trade between the two countries, many in South Korea believed that China would eventually have to see things from the South Korean perspective. Such hopes were shattered in the aftermath of Cheonan and Yeonpyeong when China again sided with North Korea. Now, many in South Korea, according to Hahm, are starting to question whether China's rise will be as peaceful as they previously thought.

Fourth, North Korea will not collapse any time soon. The regime is more resilient than we've given them credit for in the past. And if they do run into trouble, China will provide whatever assistance they need in the interest of preserving stability.

And finally, tension on the peninsula will persist, which is why we should consider this a perpetual crisis. As a result, the alliance system is as important as ever. There's no question that U.S. troops should remain in Korea and that the U.S.-South Korean alliance should be strengthened. South Korea should also pursue an alliance with Japan and seek to strengthen South Korea-China relations as well. At the same time, South Korea must get over its illusions about both North Korea and China.

The session closed with additional questions from Sanger as well as the audience. To begin, Sanger asked Samore whether the United States should consider reintroducing tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea. Samore said that he does not think we should get distracted by that debate. Tactical nuclear weapons don't carry any military utility and serve only as political symbols. If the alliance is strong enough, Samore argued, that there's no need for the weapons. Moreover, such weapons would have no effect on North Korea, while angering Russia and China, who we want on our side as much as possible.

Prompted by a question from the audience, the discussion shifted to the potential for North Korea to develop a miniaturized nuclear device. According to Samore, the United States does not have much confidence in its assessment of how far North Korea has progressed in developing a miniature weapon and long-range delivery systems. The U.S. response, according to Samore, should be to increase missile defense cooperation. This will show North Korea that our response to proliferation and provocations will be an increased military presence in the region. This will also send a message to China in particular that its national interest is being harmed by North Korea's provocations.

Another question was asked about the transfer of operational control of combined U.S.-ROK forces. According to Bell, operational control is a crucial issue for South Korea. The United States has held the command of the combined forces since the Korean War, and there's a belief that as long as the United States is involved, it will be committed. Therefore, the question is how can the United States reassure its allies? Bell argued that the United States should continue to station troops in Korea. It's a cheap deal for the United States because of the material support it receives from South Korea. He said that it would behoove us to educate Senators about the true costs and benefits of our troops in Korea.

The session closed with questions about the strategy that should be pursued going forward. General Welch argued that the United States does not have a disarming strike option. Any attempt to physically disarm North Korea carries too many risks, making it unlikely any American leader would pursue it. Samore argued that the United States cannot afford to take the position that it is containing North Korea. If the United States said it was giving up on disarmament, it would be devastating for the region and put pressure on others to develop nuclear weapons. Instead, the United States should continue to stand for denuclearization, showing North Korea that it cannot have a normal relationship with the United States or South Korea as long as it has nuclear weapons. Hahm agreed, reiterating his point that what we are facing is the management of a permanent crisis.

---

\* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

\* The views expressed here are panel overviews of the Asan Plenum. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the author or the institutions they are affiliated with.