American Foreign Policy towards the Korean Peninsula

Panel: Session I (Grand Ballroom)
Date/Time: April 25, 2012 / 15:45-17:00
Organizing Institution: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)
Speakers: Lucy Williamson, BBC (moderator)
Victor Cha, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)
Christopher Hill, University of Denver
Scott Synder, Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)
Bruce Klinger, The Heritage Foundation

Panel Short Summary

Seukhoon Paul Choi, Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)
Steven Denney, Yonsei University

"The subject of American foreign policy towards the Korean peninsula is something always talked about here in Seoul," stated moderator Lucy Williams in her opening remarks. Given the recent power transition in North Korea and the forthcoming presidential elections in South Korea and the United States, understanding US foreign policy towards the Korean peninsula, and other regional states, is crucial to a better understanding of the region as a whole.

Victor Cha started things off by briefly recapping the Obama administration's approach to Asia over the last four years. Instead of focusing on peninsula issues, Cha reminded everyone that the initial priority of the Obama administration in Asia was not the Korean peninsula, but building a strong tri-lateral relationship with Japan and China. However, after efforts to build stronger ties with Japan and China failed, the US implemented a "broad shift." This shift included expanding the scope of its engagement to the G20 nations, in addition to forging stronger trade ties. As a result, US-ROK relations strengthened. In regards to North Korea, Cha's assessment was pessimistic. Despite the Obama administration coming in with high hopes, North Korean provocations and the missile launch squelched any hope that administration officials had of starting anew with North Korea.

Christopher Hill concurred with Cha's assessment that the Obama administration's initial plan was to develop deeper bi-lateral ties with China, but because of complications, shifted its strategy towards engagement with countries like South Korea. Hill singled out Beijing's inability to deal with its manifold domestic issues, particularly the slowing of economic growth, the inflexibility of the current political system and a rise in nationalism, as key impediments to strengthening Sino-US relations. Echoing Cha's appraisal, Hill remarked that although the Obama administration went into negotiations with North with high hopes, the missile launch turned administration officials into "real

hawks."

Scott Snyder noted the Obama and Lee administrations shared a common objective and priority in focusing on North Korean denuclearization. This facilitated a positive environment to manage the relationship. Furthermore, activities associated with "global Korea" have facilitated off-peninsula bilateral cooperation, and movement toward a more comprehensive relationship. Consequently, among all the emerging powers and market democracies, as well as BRICS, South Korea has become a closer regional partner. However, with political transitions in both South Korea and the United States, it is uncertain whether the two countries will continue to share common goals and objectives.

Bruce Klingner, the last panelist, viewed US policy toward the Korean peninsula according to three events: leadership transition in North Korea; the "US pivot;" and US defense budget cuts. According to Klinger, the leadership transition in North Korea is, by all measures, going according to plan with no sign of a "kimchi" social revolution in the making. However, Klingner notes that if the Arab Spring taught us anything, it is that social revolutions are unpredictable; as such, the US should always be prepared for such an event in North Korea. As for the pivot, Klingner takes a view different from what is stated in the mainstream. Rather than an actual "rebalancing" strategy, the US is actually cutting the defense budget across the board, despite an increase in assertiveness by North Korea and China.