
Day 1 Session II: The Alliance and North Korea

Moderator: David Sanger, *New York Times*

Speakers: Kim Sung-han, Former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, ROK
Michael O'Hanlon, The Brookings Institution
Gary Samore, Harvard University
Walter Sharp, Former Commander, US Forces Korea
Yu Myung Hwan, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, ROK

Rapporteur: Clare Lynch, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

David Sanger began by noting that if the morning sessions established anything, it is that the Korea-US alliance is clearly stronger today than it has been for some time. Relations have improved during the Bush and Obama administrations, he said, but during this time North Korea has also conducted three nuclear tests, a series of missile tests, and appears to be entering a familiar cycle of nuclear tests leading to negotiations, then more provocations once negotiations fall apart. Given these circumstances, Sanger asked the panelists to consider how the alliance can make progress on North Korea without getting caught in this cycle all over again.

Former vice minister of foreign affairs Kim Sung-han began by drawing five lessons for the alliance from the past 50 years. First, he said that it is difficult to expect North Korea to give up nuclear weapons as long as the regime feels that these weapons are necessary for its survival. Second, Kim said, international unity must be maintained and North Korea must not be allowed to drive a wedge between South Korea, the United States, Japan, or China. Third, he said that Chinese leaders increasingly believe that a nuclear-armed North Korea does not serve Chinese interests. While previously some leaders believe a nuclear North Korea was preferable to its collapse, Chinese leaders are now recalculating North Korea's nuclear capability and how this is impacting their relationship with the United States.

Fourth, Kim noted that permanent peace talks requested by North Korea should be preceded by progress on the Six-Party Talks. The alliance must remind North Korea that progress on peace regime talks is linked to progress on nuclear talks, Kim said, not the other way around. Finally, Kim concluded that the United States and South Korea should go beyond deterrence and defense to try to come up with ways to realize peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula.

Responding to Sanger's query about the perceived passiveness of US policy on North Korea, General Walter Sharp, former commander of US Forces Korea, said that the United States has reached a point where it needs to force change in North Korea. Several steps will be necessary for this process, Sharp said. One is diplomatic discussions between the United States, South Korea, Japan, and China about what the reunified peninsula will look like and changed force configurations that will enhance the interests of all players, including China.

Track 2 forums including groups like ASEAN will add value, he said. In addition, Sharp said that the United States should be more vocally publicizing human rights violations in North Korea. This should include an effort to transmit information on human rights and democracy to the North Korean people and the military so that they can see the effect of 60 years of isolation on their country. Finally, the United States needs a stronger military plan in the event of another North Korea attack that will allow for a swift and strong response. This government-wide, alliance-wide approach, Sharp concluded, will go beyond hoping for change in North Korea to forcing change.

Former ROK foreign affairs minister Yu Myung Hwan added to Sharp's assessment by analyzing the alliance policy results. He characterized policy response to North Korean militarization as relatively complacent, lacking coherence, and zigzagging. Diplomatic strategy has failed to achieve demilitarization, he said, as the North Korean regime has lied again and again in the past 40 years. From now on, Yu suggested, the United States and South Korea should draw up a very detailed strategy to achieve reunification and designate this a primary objective of the alliance. He added that as President Park visits Chinese President Xi Jinping, it would be an important task to convey to Xi that a unified, nuclear-free peninsula benefits China's strategic interests and that North Korea's continued nuclear development will cause strategic losses for Beijing. Yu pointed out that as China grows bigger, North Korea's usefulness as a buffer zone is decreasing and it will soon become more of a liability than an asset. In closing, Yu said that just as German reunification heralded the end of the Cold War, building an Asia-Pacific union in the 21st century will require the unification of the Korean Peninsula.

Gary Samore of the Belfer Center echoed Yu's statement that it is not feasible to expect denuclearization through diplomacy. Samore said that North Korea is capable of modifying its rhetoric to meet diplomatic criteria for resuming negotiations. But if disarmament is not an achievable near-term goal, the alliance should begin thinking about interim measures to constrain North Korea's nuclear program, he said. The key will be establishing verification measures to check that the regime is abiding by its promises. As a maximum objective, Samore suggested the alliance should hold out for a verified freeze on enrichment and fissile material production, with a full declaration of cooperation and intrusive inspections to verify. A more achievable objective might be a delay in weapons testing, a benchmark that would be easier to check, and also more likely to gain Chinese support, Samore said. He acknowledged that any deal with the regime was likely to fall apart in the long run, given the nature of the regime to cheat or renege on their promises, but said that such intermediary measures would help postpone realization of an operational inter-continental ballistic missile capable of hitting the United States.

Michael O'Hanlon of Brookings said that the United States should bear in mind that the long-term goal with regard to North Korea is a broader dialogue on reform, including economic reform, that would move the state onto a path similar to Vietnam or South Korea. However, O'Hanlon said that current leader Kim Jong-un was not likely to adopt such a strategy given that he is a 30-year-old leader with only one and a half years in office and many decades of rule in front of him. This means, O'Hanlon said, that the alliance may have to start over with a decades-long strategy to convince Kim that reform is more appealing than presiding over a "basket case" country for half a century.

O'Hanlon continued that the alliance should enact policies that respond to North Korea provocations without adopting a confrontational attitude that would further alienate Kim. For instance, he suggested that if North Korea conducts another nuclear test, allied powers may want to impose temporary, time-limited sanctions, while keeping current indefinite sanctions in place. The alliance may also need to think more creatively about what terms they set for North Korea to denuclearize, as building some vagueness into the terms could help nudge the Kim regime onto a reform path, O'Hanlon said.

Given that Iran and North Korea are the biggest impediment in the move to a nuclear-free world, Sanger asked the panelists to assess which of the two regimes should be the primary focus of the Obama administration.

Samore said that from an analyst's viewpoint, the Obama administration should focus on Iran, because they do not have nuclear weapons yet and because using military force as a sanction in Iran is more feasible and less likely to trigger war. He also pointed out that the geostrategic consequences of Iran gaining nuclear weapons would be potentially devastating for the United States, threatening both US interests and upsetting the regional balance of power. Yu agreed, saying that North Korea is basically a weak country dependent on foreign aid and that the alliance should keep up pressure on the regime.

Sharp disagreed with the framing of the question, saying that the situation should not be seen as an either-or, and that the Obama administration is capable of managing both situations at once. He highlighted that with a well-populated city 30 miles south of the border, 25 percent of the North Korean population struggling to find food, and 200,000 North Koreans in prison camps, US vital political and strategic interests are well served by dealing effectively with the North Korean nuclear issue. US leaders should not focus completely on Iran or let North Korea move ahead with its nuclear program, as this would lead to a much more dangerous situation in the future, Sharp added.

Minister Kim contributed his analysis of the Park administration, saying that President Park is trying to stick to two principles. First, he said, North Korean provocations will not be tolerated under any circumstances and, second, the regime must respect all previous agreements. This approach, Kim said, attempts to strike a balance between security and engagement. In response, North Korea has turned from the provocative behavior typical of the "sunshine period" to dialogue mechanisms.

If and when the Kim regime becomes more reform-minded, O'Hanlon said that they will have several historical examples to draw on. The overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, Mubarak's deposal in Egypt, and the overthrow of Communism in Romania will be negative examples of a liberalizing regime, he said, while successful reforms in Vietnam and China and voluntary denuclearization in South Africa provide positive models. As a young, third generation leader who must court generals who have held power for many decades, Kim Jong-un will need some time to plot his course, O'Hanlon continued.

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