

The 16th Asan Dosirak Series with Experts

“Responding to North Korean Challenges during 2012: A Year of Political Transition”

L. Gordon Flake

Executive Director, the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation

Tuesday, May 8, 2012

The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Mr. L. Gordon Flake, the Executive Director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation presented the 16th *Asan Dosirak Series* titled “**Responding to North Korean Challenges during 2012: A Year of Political Transition**” on May 8, 2012 at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. During his presentation, Mr. Flake assessed recent developments in Northeast Asia and the potential impact of political transitions within countries involved in the Six-Party Talks on their respective North Korea policies.

Japan

Japan has had a longstanding issue with regard to Japanese abductees being held in North Korea. However, given its economic difficulties and political uncertainty, Mr. Flake projected that Japan is unlikely to be a proactive player in engaging North Korea in the near future.

Russia

Although Russia has experienced a leadership transition from Medvedev to Putin, the country has not undergone a change in its politics. This will likely mean that Russia’s North Korea policy shall remain constant. That said, Russia has been a relatively responsible player with regard to non-proliferation and has had a long history of working with the United States in engaging North Korea. On long-range missiles and North Korean nuclear tests, Russia has helpfully framed its understanding of these issues in a global context, whereas China has continued to see these issues as only regional concerns.

China

China was argued to be the most interesting country in terms of its domestic political transition this year, and the effects that transition may have on China's North Korea policy. China's leadership transition is unique because it consists of a change in generations within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Chinese leaders-in-waiting have traditionally kept a low profile, making it difficult to discern their respective positions on North Korea in advance. In recent history, China has tried to balance three priorities in its North Korea policy, which Mr. Flake refers to as the three "No's": no nukes, no collapse, and no war. China has placed the highest priority on "no collapse," thereby shielding North Korea from the consequences of its actions and "enabling" North Korea to carry out further provocations.

However, recent developments may be indicative of a shift in Chinese North Korea policy. First, the Arab Spring has fostered a noteworthy degree of paranoia among Chinese officials. Second, Chinese support for North Korea appears to have waned since the Chinese foreign ministry proved unable to prevent North Korea from carrying out its "satellite launch." Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, the Bo Xilai case is indicative of a possible future shift in China's North Korea policy. Whereas Bo Xilai was representative of the conservative and reactionary elements within the CCP, traditionally perceived to be closely aligned with North Korea, the ascendant reformists within the CCP appear to have demonstrated that they are more willing to cooperate with the international community. While not wishing to overstate this argument, Mr. Flake believes that there are "grounds for hope." The clearest evidence of this potential shift in Chinese North Korea policy is in the text of the United Nations Security Council Presidential Statement that followed the recent North Korean launch, in which a strong line was taken against North Korea conducting any such actions in the future.

United States of America

The upcoming presidential election makes it unlikely for any change in U.S. policy

regarding North Korea in the near future. The Obama administration's North Korea policy has been marked by deep skepticism since 2009 and the administration has made a point of arguing that no further progress can be made unless North Korea demonstrates a seriousness of purpose in its commitment to abandoning its nuclear program. U.S. policy on North Korea would be unlikely to change under a new administration, particularly now that consensus in Washington, D.C. has hardened after North Korea reneged on the Leap Day Deal.

Republic of Korea

From an American perspective on recent developments in ROK domestic politics, Mr. Flake observed more convergence than divergence in ROK domestic politics, which he felt is often too simplistically portrayed as being divided between conservatives and progressives. Mr. Flake argued that President Lee Myung-bak is not as conservative as he is often depicted. Within Washington, D.C., Lee Myung-bak is perceived as a “paragon of patience,” particularly in the days after the North Korean provocations of 2010. ROK conservatives are more liberal and progressive in their North Korea policy than U.S. liberal administrations. That said, ROK public opinion appears to have shifted to a more negative stance on North Korea, such as in its growing opposition to sending food aid to North Korea. Nevertheless, ROK policy on North Korea would be unlikely to change under a new administration. Even if South Korea were to attempt conciliatory overtures to North Korea, Mr. Flake believed that the new North Korean regime is unlikely to be receptive.

North Korea

North Korea is a “country on autopilot,” with North Korean institutions and officials in Pyongyang continuing to carry out Kim Jong Il's instructions, or their perceptions of what those instructions might have been. This, Mr. Flake argued, may be the best explanation for why North Korea both accepted the Leap Day Deal then reneged on it shortly thereafter, which might also account for the otherwise inexplicable

timing of these events.

Mr. Flake compared power transitions of Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un. Kim Jong Il waited three years after Kim Il Sung's death before making any significant changes and did not require titles or immediate organizational restructuring because he had already been effectively in charge for many years previously. Kim Jong Un, by contrast, has been bestowed many honors and titles by supporters of his regime. Though some analysts have noted the unexpected speed and smoothness of Kim Jong Un's transition to power, this may in fact be a sign of weakness in North Korean leadership.

* The *Asan Dosirak Series with Experts* is an informal roundtable series that brings foreign visiting scholars and policy officials together with the public for an hour and a half of open discussion. Named after the Korean word for "lunch box," the *Dosirak Series* allows for a more conversational and free-flowing discussion between speakers and participants.