

**Conversations with History:  
Diplomacy and International Politics**  
by **Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley**

THE ASAN INSTITUTE  
for POLICY STUDIES  
Han Sung Joo  
Chairman  
2019.11.29.

*\* This interview is part of the Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley's "Conversations with History" series. (Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKHjYhGvOew> )*

■ **INTERVIEWER: Harry Kreisler, Institute of International Studies UC Berkeley**

■ **INTERVIEWEE: Sung-Joo Han, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies**

■ **INTERVIEWED ON: The Institute of International Studies UC Berkeley, 2003**

Kreisler: Mr. Ambassador, welcome back to Berkeley.

Han: Thank you.

Kreisler: Where were you born and raised?

Han: I was born in Seoul; I was raised in Seoul. I am one of the few people in Korea who are genuine Seoulites. My family has been living there for generations, hundreds of years.

Kreisler: Looking back, how do you think your parents shaped your thinking about the world?

Han: I was born about five years before the liberation from the Japanese. I don't remember very much except to see the B-29s flying over at the end of the Second World War. But, of course, I didn't know the significance of the whole thing. Then in five years' time, in 1950, the Korean War broke out, and that war was, of course, a major event for me. I was wounded, although I was not in the service. I was too young. But I still carry a small piece of shrapnel in my back.

Kreisler: Was this just a fluke accident?

Han: No, it happened during the recapture of Seoul, after General MacArthur landed in Inchon, in September of 1950. The U.N. forces, led by the U.S. and South Korean forces, came near Seoul, and there was some bombardment and I was hit by the shrapnel.

Then I went to college. I had the chance to study in the United States. I spent much of my student time at Berkeley. I taught here, went back to Korea. I had the good fortune of both teaching at a university and having an experience in government.

Kreisler: Let's go back a minute. Talk a little about your parents. How did they help you understand all these events that you've just described? Was there much talk of politics around the dinner table?

Han: Not much. My father was a businessman, and my mother always told me not to become a businessman because it's not an easy job to do. My mother wanted me to be either a medical doctor or a lawyer. For some reason I didn't end up at either one of those. But my mother, who didn't get a higher education, left a tremendous impression on me because she is the model of what you would call the "mother of Mencius." Mencius was Chinese, but the idea being that his mother moved home three times so that her son would get a good education.

Kreisler: I see, yes.

Han: And so I dedicated my first book to her.

Kreisler: She pushed you to get an education. So what did she think when you said, "I'm going to become a political scientist?"

Han: She probably didn't understand what being a political scientist meant. She probably thought that even being a political scientist, I could still become a lawyer.

Kreisler: That's right. What led you to want to be a political scientist, to study politics and international affairs?

Han: The Korean War ended in 1953, and I entered college in 1958, so it was only five years after the end of the Korean War. Then we had a problem with our politics. We had a dictatorship going, and it was a choice between sociology and political science. At that time it looked like politics was the thing to study, whether I wanted to understand international relations or domestic politics.

Kreisler: What is it like growing up with war around you, and then a country divided by the Cold War, other than shaping the kinds of subjects you would be interested in? What other kinds of impacts were there on you?

Han: Everybody is politically more conscious, and they have views about politics. When I first came to the United States, and that was in 1962, I went to the University of New Hampshire, in Durham, to do my Masters work. That was before coming to Berkeley. I wrote an article for a Korean magazine saying, "I find American college students so apolitical. They're only interested in the parties, dancing, studying, and drinking beer." That was before I came to Berkeley in 1964.

Kreisler: I see. And before the Student Movement, too.

Han: That's right.

Kreisler: What was your major within political science? Was it Asian politics and international relations that you focused on in graduate school?

Han: Yes, I did both. It was known as comparative politics and international relations.

Kreisler: And you studied under Robert Scalapino here?

Han: I studied under Robert Scalapino, Professor Ernst Haas. There was also Professor Chalmers Johnson, who has since left Berkeley. And a whole lot of others, most of whom are not here.

Kreisler: Chalmers is coming back and will be on the show in a few months, actually.

Han: Oh, please give my regards to him.

Kreisler: Yes, I will do that.

## **South Korean Politics**

Kreisler: What was your dissertation on?

Han: I wrote my dissertation on the democratization process in Korea, with a focus on the student uprising in 1960, in which I participated. At that time I did participate in the demonstration, and when we went to the presidential palace or residence, the police began to shoot at us. Dozens of students were shot and killed on the spot. At that time, I had gotten some military training, so I crawled my way out of the milieu, but I tried to put it in what is generally known as political scientific context.

Kreisler: That must have been a searing experience on your politics, on your thinking about your country and so on.

Han: Yes. The title of the book, which was published by the University of California Press, is *The Failure of Democracy in South Korea*. The theme was that even though it was not apparent at that time, there was a tremendous ideological cleavage in Korea. The cleavage was between the democratic forces and the authoritarian forces, the leftist forces and the rightist forces. For many years, in fact decades, the ideological conflict didn't become apparent, because we were in confrontation with North Korea. There was no room for leftism to be expressed, and everybody was fighting for democratic rights. So even though we had authoritarian politics, the ideal, of course, was democracy.

Today, we have tremendous ideological cleavage and conflict in Korea, which I hoped would heal and converge, but that convergence hasn't taken place. If anything, it has gotten worse. Sometimes it has been expressed in our relationship with other countries, such as our relationship with the United States, our relationship with North Korea.

Kreisler: We'll talk about that in a minute, but let's go back to this work. This ideological clash meant that there were different views about North Korea and about the United States by these two groups as they fought over the degree of democratization within Korea itself.

Han: Yes. Most people were in favor of and fighting for democracy. Those who are on the right piggybacked on this democratic struggle to promote their ideology. Those on the left also piggybacked on the democratic struggle to promote theirs, and now we have not only the cleavage between the right and the left, but also in our approach toward North Korea and in our relationship with the United States.

Kreisler: Coming now to the present, you say that this conflict has never healed. Why has it never healed? Why has it never resolved itself? Because the country was never reunited?

Han: That is a very important element. After the Second World War, there were several countries -- Germany, China, Vietnam, and Korea -- that were divided. China remains divided, but Korea is most conspicuously divided. When you look at the alliance with the United States, a great majority in an annual opinion survey, about 80 percent of the Koreans, will say, "We need the continued presence of American troops in Korea." And yet, when you ask people, "Do you like America?" the answer comes in a different way. In some ways, being familiar, being too close, and the sense of being too dependent on another country can make people resentful.

Kreisler: We're also witnessing now in your country a change of generations, because a big chunk of the population in Korea must have been born after the Korean War.

Han: Of course. Even the president himself, although he was born after the [onset] of the Korean War, has no real memory of the war as such. Many people who are in government were born long after the end of the Korean War, so they don't understand the circumstances under which the American forces began to be present in Korea, much less remember what happened then. Also, they grew up during a period of relative prosperity and generally democratic politics. Although many of them had fought against [our own] authoritarian, military government, so they have the experience of fighting against authoritarian governments, they don't have much memory of economic hardship. They certainly don't feel, in their skins, [the fear] of the threat that did exist, and that it's still very much a part of our life coming from the outside.

Kreisler: Of course, Korea has done very well economically in the meantime -- with a little help from us, maybe, in the beginning, but since then its economy has really taken off. So there must be a kind of a social base for being more autonomous and not being dependent in the way the country was in the early phase of the Cold War.

Han: Well, they certainly want to be more assertive. There is an urge to be even overly assertive. If you feel very sure of yourself, then even some impression of slight may be passed up as nothing very serious; but we are very conscious of how other people treat us. For example, a few weeks ago when President Bush went over to Bangkok to attend the APEC meeting, his plane needed to refuel somewhere, so they chose Tokyo to be the layover place, just one night. And people in Korea felt they were slighted, "How come he chose Japan and not us?" So regardless of whether they like the United States so or not, whether they like President Bush or not, the fact that they did not stop in Korea is seen as a slap on the face.

## The Work of Diplomacy

Kreisler: You're suggesting that part of what diplomacy and international politics are about is navigating between these changes in the world and the changes or non-changes in old ways of thinking. And one needs to sort all this out, [to see that], in fact, the refueling was not an affront; it was just a matter of logistics. But it could be used in debate about how your country should respond to North Korea.

Han: You know if this happened, say, in Britain -- if President Bush stopped in Madrid or in Paris instead of London, I don't think the British would have minded that much. But, of course, there's more to diplomacy than just to navigate between these conflicting demands. I think we tend to, not only in Korea, but most people tend to look at diplomacy as an almost immediate give-and-take kind of thing. Any outcome is seen as the product of the contention between different forces and different views.

From my own experience, very often it is the product of thinking out, finding what the best solution is that is advantageous to both sides, even between adversaries. Let's say between North Korea and the rest of us on the nuclear issue, there can be a solution that is advantageous to both sides. And this is even more so between allies. Recently I said, "Diplomacy should be seen more like playing a Go game, rather than running a 100-meter race going straight to the goal." In a Go game, you have to look at the whole board and you touch here and there, and sometimes you sacrifice small things for larger gains. Both flexibility and medium-term, long-term goals should be taken into account.

I also sometimes compare diplomacy to acupuncture. I don't know if you're familiar with acupuncture or not, but they don't always go after the place where it hurts. If you have stomach trouble, sometimes they will poke the palm of your hand. If you have a backache, they will put the needle on your leg. Sometimes when you have heart trouble, they will treat the bottom of the foot. One has to have the ability to look at the totality and to find the right formula to deal with the problem or solve the problem.

Kreisler: You're saying that you begin with the presumption that the problem can be solved, or at least some interim solution can be found, so the worst doesn't happen.

Han: Well, obviously, some problems may not be solved. But I'm generally optimistic that with enough effort and clear thinking, we can find a way to resolve the problem.

Kreisler: Taking those metaphors as the essence of diplomacy, that suggests that in a room full of diplomats it would be much easier to play Go, or do acupuncture, and move along this positive road. But as diplomats or somebody with a foreign ministry portfolio, you have to respond to the domestic forces that you were just describing, which complicates both metaphors, doesn't it? In other words, the thing that interferes with your seeing the systemic picture, or understanding that doing something here might help the problem that's over there, is the factions, the debates within a domestic political system.

Han: Yes. One thing one learns, especially somebody like myself, who comes out of academia without much experience in diplomacy, is the tremendous relevance of domestic politics. This is something that Henry Kissinger pointed out long ago, the importance of the domestic linkage. One

has to be able to deal not only with foreign governments, but also with your own domestic constituency. I used to say, "It's more difficult to deal with your relatives than the barbarians."

Kreisler: Right now there seems to be an intense debate in your country on issues across the board, but especially with regard to the U.S. role in resolving the conflict with North Korea. Is that an overstatement? In other words, is there a range of views within your own country about how to deal with North Korea in the context of the U.S.-South Korean relationship?

Han: It's partly the case. Yes, there is the significant part of the population which thinks that the U.S. is not showing enough enthusiasm to resolve the issue in a peaceful way. Much of this is out of misunderstanding of what transpired in the past. Right now, I can say that the United States is making a genuine effort to find a peaceful solution to this problem.

Kreisler: Of North Korea ... ?

Han: Of the North Korea nuclear issue. But the bottom line is that we have to see the dismantlement of North Korean nuclear facilities -- weapons, if they have them, and material. It takes all kinds of ways and methods, and people have different views about how to approach this. I don't take personal credit for it, but fortunately, during the past few months, there has been much closing of the gap, if there was such a gap, between countries, especially between the United States and South Korea as to how we should and can deal with this problem. I think we are making some progress, although we can never be totally optimistic.

## **Theory and Practice in International Politics**

Kreisler: You are ideally situated to talk about the nexus between theory and practice in international politics. At Berkeley you studied theories and how those theories come up against the realities of the real world. On the other hand, from your own experience, you're also very sensitive to the ideologies that dominate domestic debates. You were involved in the human rights struggle in your own country, and sometimes that can lead to an idealism that's good internally, but it may not work when you try to apply it internationally. So I'm curious about that.

Can you offer any insights about how theories -- academic theories and ideologies of movement for change -- confront reality? A third example of this would be, in American foreign policy, ideologies about how the U.S. should relate to the world which also come up against reality. Using your metaphor, you come back to the game of Go, so to speak, in how you have to act or any diplomat has to act.

Han: One ability that academics have more of than practitioners is the ability to connect; that is, connect with other cases, connect with history, connect with, possibly, the future. Not that practitioners can't do that, but academics are better equipped to do that. What practitioners have more of is the knowledge and understanding of how things are and how things work, or don't work. It is extremely useful to have been an academic, to be involved in this practice, because you can bring all these connections and it will be very helpful. For example, when I served as foreign minister in Korea,

I was considered as more of a moderate dove than most other Koreans. Today, I'm probably considered as someone more ... not really a hawk, but somewhat ... I would like to consider myself as a realist, but ...

Kreisler: Less a dove.

Han: Than many others ... At that time, I was caught between more hawkish South Korea and more dove-ish United States. Right now, the situation is somewhat the other way around. Maybe I didn't change, while the others changed. But at that time, ten years ago, when I was serving as foreign minister, I was looking at the debate and the difference between the moderates and the hardliners in Israel, for example. I was a very good friend of Shimon Peres, and we always talked about how the hardliners think, and they tend to make things worse rather than better. This is, of course, something that the practitioner can do, but an academic will be able to do much better by comparing, by finding a pattern, and finding causes and consequences. And that's where theories actually come from.

So it's very useful, I found, after going back to academia, to have been a practitioner; because then I would know if somebody is making sense or not. Among American academics, I remember Professor Ernie Haas telling me that I tend to be a little too practical to be a theoretician. On other hand, somebody like Joseph Nye, at Harvard, would be both theoretical and practical, but I don't think he would have made the same remark to me that Professor Haas did. So without saying which is a better way to look at things, I think even academics have different balances in how they approach theories and practical realities.

Kreisler: Do you think that the academics or the idealists are better able to see alternative futures than people who are embedded in the realities and trying to come up with a solution in the here and now?

Han: Well, as a neophyte diplomat, I will not give that answer to you.

Kreisler: Okay. What about people who are ideologues within democratic polities? We don't have to necessarily talk about a particular country; ideologues who develop a passion and a view of the way the world should be. This is different than the pure theorist in the academy. How as a diplomat do you find are the best ways to deal with them, so that they come to change their passions and their ideas in the face of the realities of this game of Go, as you called it?

Han: That is the main challenge for practitioners. I don't think there's any other way than "success itself." I don't think you'll be able to argue and win the argument [on persuasion alone]. Again, back in 1993 and '94, those people who were opposed to negotiating with North Korea, the only way to persuade them was to have a successful negotiation. I tried to tell them why we should turn this into a non-zero-sum, win-win game for both of us, and I was not able to do that. Nothing will succeed like success itself.

Kreisler: I guess you're also saying that a bad idea, or a bad ideology, has to fail before the person who is passionate will change his views in the face of reality?

Han: I don't know if even when that belief fails, they will change it. But, certainly, there is less chance that they will be able to take action on the basis of that belief.



## International Politics after 9/11

Kreisler: How do you think the events of 9/11 and the U.S. response has affected the dynamic in Asia and the U.S. role in that region?

Han: In Asia, especially in Southeast Asia, it was not only the United States but other countries like Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines -- all have been affected by the same forces, and so they do understand the trauma of the United States, of September 11, 2001. On the other hand, most people and most countries will not have the same degree and the same extent of feelings, which are very difficult to feel. The kind of actions that the United States takes, the kind of responses that the U.S. makes, often are seen as excessive, because distance-wise, and especially with the time passing, they may have a different perspective on what happened here and how people feel here, the kind of experience they have at the airports, for example, when they visit this country, which is perfectly understandable, but not easy to empathize with. This is where the U.S. can be a little more sensitive. Again, I don't think it has to result in any big distance in the way countries respond to the problem. I think that the U.S. government is coming around to understanding the complexity of the problem.

Kreisler: One of the arguments that was made before 9/11 was that we were in a new era in which economic issues would prevail -- globalization, maybe concerns about inequality and the distribution of resources, and so on. But now we seem to have gone back to heavily emphasizing security, military solutions to some of these problems, and also an emphasis on unilateral responses and not multilateral ones.

Let's look at those views and apply them to the situation of North Korea, which is a major problem for the world and for the region. It would seem that that problem can only be solved in a broader context, to use your image of a game of Go. You're looking at economic issues that concern the North Korean regime, then looking at multilateral solutions and working at them. Would you comment on that? In other words, how do we have to think about the world and how do we have to act in it, post-9/11?

Han: Seen as a whole, I think there has been a pendulum swing on the part of the United States from multilateralism to unilateralism, and back. The reliance on military means to more comprehensive means, and back and forth. At the moment, I think the U.S. is placing more emphasis on multilateralism than it has ever done since 9/11, and that the U.S. is placing more emphasis on the comprehensive approach than simply relying on military means than before.

On the issue of the North Korean nuclear program, there was never a time when the United States thought military response was the solution. But especially now, the president, the secretary of state, the responsible leaders in the U.S. government are all placing great emphasis on a peaceful resolution of the issue, and also a multilateral process. The U.S. is treating the case of Iraq differently from the case of North Korea, and I think we all approve of the way that the U.S. is approaching it now.

Kreisler: If you were addressing an American audience, what are some of the key elements that you feel they should understand about the complexity of North Korea? What is the best way to think about this complexity and participate in this process of finding a solution?



Han: One way to do that is [to examine] how the North Korean situation is different from the Iraqi situation. On the one hand, it has greater potential for danger, because North Korea is far more advanced with weapons of mass destruction than Iraq ever was. At the same time, it portends greater danger of any military action, because of the compactness of the geopolitical situation there, the geopolitics of it. There is the city of Seoul, with more than 12 million people, only about 25 miles from the border, where there are tens of thousands of artillery pieces and hundreds of missiles pointed at not only Koreans but tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of foreigners within the artillery range. This is a situation that is much more challenging, much more difficult to deal with.

On the other hand, we're dealing with a regime which is economically much more desperate and vulnerable; therefore, it will be possible to use this leverage or this inducement if we do it in a proper way. What we need is a very close coordination, especially among the three countries -- the U.S., the Republic of Korea, and Japan -- but also with other countries which are now participating in the process -- China and Russia. We need multilateral diplomacy, we need close coordination, but also a very intelligent strategy in dealing North Korea.

Kreisler: The big question about North Korea is, what is it they want? Do they want a nuclear arsenal more than anything else, or are they looking for ways to engage the world and become part of a process where they can salvage their economy?

Han: It's impossible to give that answer. We had the same question ten years ago. Are they going to trade their nuclear program away at the right price, or are they determined to become a nuclear power no matter what, and they are just using the time or the negotiation to stall so that they can complete their program? There are several possibilities: They want to become a nuclear power no matter what. They may want to trade it away at a high price. They may want to wait until the next presidential election in the United States, November of 2004, and see what happens after that. They may want to adjust their goal and the strategy as things move on.

The challenge for us is to find a response and a strategy that will deal with all these possibilities. What that involves is to place emphasis on negotiation. Without having tried negotiation, we'll never know if it will have worked or not. We cannot start with the assumption that negotiation will never work, and do our best to bring it into a successful conclusion. If it doesn't, then we'll have to figure out what we'll do next. And whatever we do next, even if it is what we call "tougher measures" of pressing North Korea more, then the other countries, especially countries such as China, will be persuaded. It will be easier to persuade those countries to get onboard, because we have shown them that we have exhausted all our goodwill to resolve this in a peaceful way and to address North Korea's concerns and desires, but it hasn't worked. So that it is important, at first, that we exhaust all these peaceful means, which means negotiation.

## Conclusion

Kreisler: Looking back at your life, it's a very interesting story: somebody who was raised in the context of the Korean War, who was educated in Korea but then came to the United States for an education and advanced degree after having been involved in human rights. Growing in that background, how would you advise students to think about their own future and to prepare for it, if they're interested in international politics and the work of diplomacy?

Han: I don't know if I'm in a position to give advice. If I were doing it all over again or if I were talking to my own children, who have grown up already and have their own careers, but if I had younger children, what I would be most concerned about is not to be locked from the beginning into a set ideology, view, or explanation of things faulting this country or that country, or to try to interpret everything that happens on the basis of that theory, ideology, belief, whatever you call it, which is to say, without your backbone.

Try to have an open mind. It's very important to have a very pragmatic view on issues: What will solve the problem? What will make it better?

Also, not to attribute intentions. You might say, "He's a bad guy," whether he or she is your foe or your own leader. Whatever the policy is, it's a given fact, and we start from there. What I'm trying to say is to minimize the involvement of emotions.

But other than this question of ideology or emotions, I think it's extremely important to do what you are doing, and that is, to "converse with history," to understand history. Whether you want to be an American diplomat, whether you want to be a Korean diplomat, that doesn't mean it's enough to study American history, to study Korean history. It's very important to know about what's happening in other parts of the world, and what happened in other times in world history.

Kreisler: On that note, Ambassador Han, I want to thank you very much for coming back to Berkeley and participating in our program, and plugging the idea of a "conversation with history."

Han: Thanks for having me here.

Kreisler: Thank you. And thank you very much for joining us for this Conversation with History.