



SESSION SKETCHES

Asan Plenum 2013: "New World Disorder"
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Refugees and Neighbors

Panel: Session 6 (Regency Room)

Date/Time: Wednesday, May 2, 2013 / 15:30-16:45

Speakers: Lucy Williamson, BBC
Bruce Bennett, RAND Corporation
Cheng Xiaohe, Renmin University
Nicholas Eberstadt, American Enterprise Institute
Miyake Kuni, The Canon Institute for Global Studies
Shin Beomchul, Korea Institute for Defense Analysis

Rapporteur: Ardie Ermac, Korea University

The possibility of a North Korean breakdown looms large in the region not only because of its destabilizing potential but also because of the likely humanitarian crisis that will ensue. The moderator, Lucy Williamson, brought to the fore two fundamental questions crucial to this issue. First, what are the possible scenarios of a North Korean collapse; how and when? And second, in the eventuality of such scenarios how would the neighboring countries respond?

Bruce Bennett believes that the possibility of a collapse in a failed state such as the DPRK is high and such a collapse would be dramatic and sudden. Bennett argued that meeting the humanitarian needs of the North Korean population is far easier than once they move across borders. Rather than thinking of responding to the possible flow of refugees, he suggested that states should think of earlier humanitarian aid. The second speaker, Cheng Xiaohe noted that Pyongyang is currently experiencing dramatic changes, which is to some extent reflected in its changing relationship with China. In fact, in China a split of views is apparent; on the one hand are those who support the idea that the North Korean regime is of China's interests and on the other are those who see the relationship as costly and has prevented the country from contributing to the collective good in the region. Nevertheless, he argued that it is extremely important for China to be prepared to respond to potential consequences of such changes.

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Nicholas Eberstadt presented a different approach on how neighboring states, particularly South Korea should take action in the event the North Korean regime collapses. Eberstadt believed that the US case of “reunification” at the end of the civil war in the 1860s has a lot to offer South Korea in case it has to undergo reunification. He pointed out the things that did not happen in the US case (e.g. less mobility from the South to other regions) and argued that South Korea should reflect on the American experience in order to avoid making the same mistakes.

Miyake Kuni’s talk centered largely on the potential responses that the Japanese government might take to mitigate the influx of North Korean refugees. Kuni believes that the regime is strong and resilient, but in the event of a collapse, the likely scenario would be that Japan will enlist the help of the US forces in the country under Article VI of the security agreement as it lacks additional capacity to accommodate the potential influx of refugees. Unlike Japan, it can be argued that South Korea is better prepared for the possibility of contingency in the North.

According to Shin Beomchul economic forces will lead to the collapse of the regime and since it is virtually impossible to predict when it would happen, South Korea should focus more on prevention than on response. He stressed the importance of cooperation with the other neighboring countries in steering North Korea into the right direction, however if the country continues to refuse to give up its nuclear program, he deems it difficult for cooperation to flourish.

Essentially the panelists have stressed that a North Korean collapse remains to be highly unpredictable, and as such a successful regional response calls for more coordination and cooperation among its neighbors.

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