
Panel: On North Korea

Date/Time: Wednesday, April 23, 2014 / 14:00-15:15

Speakers: Victor Cha, CSIS (Moderator)

Chun Yungwoo, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Alexander Lukin, Diplomatic Academy, Russian MFA

Evans Revere, Brookings Institution

Yang Xiyu, China Institute of International Studies

Rapporteur: Stefan Soesanto, Pacific Forum CSIS

In light of heightened activities at North Korea's Punggye-ri nuclear test site, Professor Victor Cha kicked off the plenary session by asking the panel members whether the DPRK will conduct its fourth nuclear test and what purpose it might serve.

According to Ambassador Chun the DPRK would need additional long-range missile tests to build-up a credible nuclear deterrent. Thus, Pyongyang's primary intention for a new nuclear test is putting North Korea back into the center of regional attention. Additionally, Pyongyang's aggressive behavior has spurred Beijing's unwillingness to sacrifice stability in North Korea for non-proliferation and denuclearization purposes.

Dr. Alexander Lukin responded that the only viable option open to Pyongyang is to surrender its nuclear weapons or develop a powerful nuclear deterrent. Considering what has happened to Libya and Iraq, the regime in North Korea is hard pressed to give up its nuclear quest. Mr. Revere added that the DPRK enshrined its status as a nuclear weapons state in its constitution. North Korea's strategic nuclear deterrent is the treasured sword of the nation.

Mr. Yang joined the overall argument by stating that North Korea's missile program has indeed fallen behind the country's nuclear progress. And that in order to create a reliable, deliverable, and accurate deterrent, the DPRK would need to conduct not only long- but also medium-range missile tests. On the question of the purpose of a fourth nuclear test, Mr. Yang elaborated that Pyongyang is seeking to correct the current imbalance in North-South military capabilities. Furthermore, the DPRK's nuclear program is ultimately aimed at achieving a strategic middle-class power status to engage the United States on a level playing field in technical, strategic, and diplomatic terms.

On the question of how the regional powers could stop an upcoming test and how they ought to respond, Dr. Lukin stated that Russia and China approached the North Korean nuclear problem on a pure denuclearization basis, whilst the other powers are pursuing a further regime change agenda.

Mr. Evans advocated the idea of taking economic sanctions to the next level by targeting the North Korean banking and financial sector. The primary aim of this strategy is to send a clear

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message to Pyongyang that it is putting its economic survival at stake by pursuing nuclearization. Mr. Yang offered a slightly different view by pointing out that the Six-Party Talks have failed to create an architecture that made North Korea understand the severe consequences of challenging the international community. The regional powers, furthermore, failed to clearly communicate to Pyongyang the benefits of cooperation.

Ambassador Chun advocated that sanctions ought to be agreed upon beforehand in order to serve as a visible punitive measure to alter North Korean cost-benefit calculations.

Mr. Evans warned that a credible North Korean nuclear arsenal would pull regional security policies along a different trajectory in terms of US security commitments and the nuclear ambitions of South Korea and Japan.

On the question of the stability of the North Korean political system, Mr. Yang stated that the DPRK’s power transition has not yet been completed due to the large age gap between Kim Jong-un and the other members within the current leadership. Mr. Yang inferred that far more changes will occur within the leadership in future.