

Resolving the Korean Crisis: Voices of the Region

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On April 10, the Harvard Korea Institute, The Korea Society, and the Harvard Project for Asian and International Relations (HPAIR) co-hosted *Resolving the Korean Crisis: Voices of the Region*, a conference exploring Asian regional perspectives on addressing the current nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. The event was held the day after the fall of Baghdad, the day of North Korea's official withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), and the week before the three-way talks in Beijing.

Former US Ambassador to South Korea, Donald Gregg, who currently serves as President of The Korea Society, stressed the need for a coherent US policy toward North Korea and how a lack of negotiation increases the opportunity for conflict. Don Oberdorfer, professor at Johns Hopkins University and prominent journalist and advisor on Korean affairs, delivered the keynote address. Professor Oberdorfer presented a historical analysis of events leading up to the current crisis and explained why uncertainty about the actions of the DPRK, ROK and US make today's situation on the Peninsula the most dangerous since 1953. He predicted that divergent security interests among the three would lead to military action.

Special remarks were made by Ambassador Song Ryol Han, Deputy Permanent Representative of the DPRK Mission to the United Nations. Ambassador Han argued that North Korea's nuclear activities are a result of the Agreed Framework failing to meet a "serious energy shortage on the Northern part." In his remarks, he provided North Korea's first reaction to the fall of Baghdad: "The result of the Iraq war gives the DPRK a kind of determination and the will to take assured measures to defend its territory against possible US attacks." However, Han also said that Pyongyang and Washington need to meet halfway on preconditions in order for meaningful dialogue to proceed. According to the *Korea Times*, Han's statement was largely interpreted as an indication that the DPRK might accept a multilateral framework for resolving the nuclear crisis. Soon after, talks were held in Beijing among the DPRK, US and China, with the possibility of enlarging the table later. Ambassador Han concluded that resolution of the crisis would require an end to the "American nuclear threat to the DPRK," a process of negotiation, and steps toward economic development with neighboring countries.

The first of two panels, made up of distinguished professors and policy experts, focused on the perspectives of North and South Korea and prospects for inter-Korean relations. Analysis of the North Korean position pointed to signs of being "over-deterred" while not suggesting imminent collapse. Rather than exhibiting irrational behavior, it was argued that North Korean policy is becoming less ideological and more pragmatic, despite bellicose diplomatic statements. It was agreed that the view from South Korea will be pivotal, not in the least because of the dynamic political situation due to increased democratization and generational change. Young and middle-aged people have no memory of the Korean War; South Koreans today seem more interested in reconciliation and co-existence with North Korea than with deterrence and containment.

The second panel examined the national perspectives of China, Japan and Russia. China was predicted to play a more direct role, acting on its primary interest of ensuring stability on the neighboring Peninsula. Japan was seen as highly concerned with North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear capabilities. However, Prime Minister Koizumi's trip to Pyongyang was judged as a missed opportunity because both sides mismanaged the sensitive kidnapping issue. Russian officials reportedly told Kim Jung-il soon after he took leadership of the DPRK that it would be a mistake to focus solely on bilateral negotiations with the US, and now cite the unraveling Agreed Framework as evidence. Moscow, like Beijing and Tokyo, wants to prevent escalation of the nuclear issue and diplomatically press for a denuclearized Peninsula. The importance of the NPT and role of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was also discussed at the conference. But Aleksandr Ilitchev, Senior Officer at the United Nations Department of Political Affairs, emphasized that the UN acts most crucially as a facilitator of food aid to North Korea, to prevent a parallel humanitarian crisis.

Professor Carter Eckert, Director of the Korea Institute, summarized the proceedings as a step in the right direction. The conference provided a timely and significant opportunity to constructively consider regional voices and interests, and presented an unusual occasion for the media, university and public communities to interact with specialists and officials including Ambassador Han. One of the most debated questions offered by the audience was "would the US approve of the persistence of the current North Korean regime, even if it were free of WMD?" A wide range of sometimes conflicting views were heard on the appropriate mix of engagement and confrontation with North Korea, but there was a general consensus that the conference promoted a better understanding of regional perspectives and contributed to the ongoing international dialogue necessary for resolving the current crisis.