

UPF: Trying to Decipher Recent Events in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

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UPF Peace Talk 4, Prospects and Challenges for Peace on the Korean Peninsula in Light of Recent Developments



Dr. Walsh: I will move on to our next panelist, who is none other than Ambassador Tae-ik Chung, who's had a long and distinguished career in public service. He served in various diplomatic posts -- I know in Egypt and Italy and Russia and has worked closely with the United Nations with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He is knowledgeable, so I am going to give the floor to you, Mr. Ambassador, Tae-ik Chung.

Thank you! Good morning everybody. I am glad to see you. I am honored to share my view on the prospects and challenges for peace on the Korean Peninsula in light of recent developments.

Among recent developments, the most important are two things: the Coronavirus pandemic issue and the Korean general election. As has been mentioned, in the general election, Moon Jae-in's party gained the victory overwhelmingly. So President Moon Jae-in has a mandate to conduct foreign policy as he wants to guide it. In that context, Moon Jae-in will have a press conference on Sunday, May 10, the day after tomorrow, marking the three years he has been in power. The

press is expecting him to mention the prospects regarding the relationship between the two Koreas. But North Korea has turned away from cooperation with South Korea. Kim Jong-un is focusing on the relationship with the United States, particularly the relationship with President Trump. So whatever good project the South Korean government proposes to improve bilateral relations, including connection of the railroad, I do not see many prospects from that relationship.

It is my view that the dialog between Kim Jong-un and Trump should be rebooted first... North Korea is uneasy about the present situation. The issue of the disappearance of Kim Jong-un for the last three weeks is (this is my view)... a sort of an impact [an attempt] to draw the attention of the United States. Of course, his health problem is a serious one, although he appeared on the first day of May by participating in a construction ceremony, it is a fact that he has a health problem. His health problem [has serious implications for] North Korea as well as for the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia in general. Because North Korea has nuclear weapons, if a crisis arises in the North Korean regime, it is dangerous, a risky thing, because we should know who controls their nuclear facilities. That's why we should pay attention.

First of all, the international community should develop some regime [a management method] to control

North Korea. When Kim Jong-il was sick, at that time, the United States and China cooperated. They had a meeting and they discussed how to control North Korea, how to control the nuclear problem. But with the pandemic issue, we are now witnessing that friction between China and the United States is further aggravated. That is dangerous. In this case, the lack of leadership from the United States and China has created a serious problem in the entire world.

Under those circumstances, Kim Jong-un's health issues have created various serious problems for peace on the Korean Peninsula. Not only on the Korean Peninsula but in the entire region. We have to develop a contingency program. I would like to ask the United States whether it is prepared or has a contingency plan regarding the crisis on the Korean Peninsula. China has already deployed soldiers along the Yalu River and the Tumen River [The two rivers that form the border between China and the DRPK]. They are ready to intervene. Of course, we know that the United States is also conducting a special operation by mobilizing their strategic defense assets in Korea and Japan and the United States. They have such an operation but still I wonder whether the United States is ready to intervene.

In regards to the North Korean nuclear issue, I, myself, was involved in negotiations with North Korea to produce rules related to conducting inspections because the two Koreas agreed to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula [as part of the April 27, 2018 Panmunjeom Declaration] but we failed because the two Koreas are far, far apart on opposite sides. North Korea does not respect international principles established by the United Nations, they ignore those rules, because they think all international rules are products of the United States. That is why they oppose the basic norms of conducting negotiations. That [leads to] a dangerous situation.

Kim Jong-un's health is not good; it is bad. There will be a power vacuum. We should prepare for a possible power struggle when a power vacuum occurs. UPF should mobilize wisdom to prepare for various contingencies. This is possible. In Syria, when there was a power vacuum, internal friction arose, but it was manageable. But in North Korea's case, they have nuclear weapons; this is a different case from that of Syria.

Since this is such a risky and dangerous situation we should have governance [to maintain] international order. I am worried that we will be victimized by the friction between the big powers. We want rules that will bring good governance. On the nuclear issue, we haven't made any progress even though Moon Jae-in focused on improvement in this area with North Korea, so I would like to conclude that taking advantage of this occasion we should more seriously tackle this issue. Thank you.

Dr. Walsh: Thank you Mr. Ambassador. I hope that perhaps a little bit later, perhaps Ambassador DeTrani and Dr. Mansourov might reflect on preparedness, should there be regime change, or something related to Kim Jong-un's health that leads to a crisis. We're talking a lot about preparedness for pandemics, but we have to think about it geopolitically as well. I would like you to give us a brief window to address the elections. The former ambassador, Thae Yongho [a defector, in 2016, who had been North Korea's deputy ambassador to the UK] won election to the National Assembly from Seoul's Gangnam Borough. How is that viewed by the North and the South?

Tae-ik Chung: I think it was shocking news to the North Korean people. North Korea is tightly controlled but information still flows. It would have been shocking news to North Koreans. Tae Youngho so deeply believed that Kim Jong-un had serious problems that he did not expect the reappearance of Kim Jong-un. However, we should still admit that Kim Jong-un does have some problem.