

UPF USA IMAP Webinar: Prospects for Establishing a UN Office in Korea

Hans Moyer
April 26, 2022



United States -- Dag Hammarskjold, the second UN secretary general, said the UN "was created not to lead mankind to heaven but save humanity from hell." Has it done that? The UN Secretariat based in New York City has offices in Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi to address regional concerns. Many argue that Northeast Asia's security issues have long justified a new UN regional office. Critics cite the UN's spotty record handling transboundary threats. China and Taiwan, the DPRK and ROK, China and the Quad, ROK and Japan -- a UN regional office located in Korea would have all these complex relationships in their portfolio.



UPF-IMAP held a webinar, "Expectations for a United Nations Regional Office on the Korean Peninsula: Hopes for Easing Tensions between North and South Korea," on April 26, 2022. The first speaker was Dr. **Barthelemy Courmont**, professor of Contemporary History and International Relations at the Catholic University of Lille, France, and senior research fellow at the Paris-based Institute of International and Strategic Relations (IRIS). He reviewed the situation on the Korean Peninsula in three different contexts: security/military, dealing with the North's nuclear testing; political, dealing with the agenda of the new incoming president and his administration; and the international situation in Europe with the Ukraine/Russia conflict.

Dr. Courmont stated that the new South Korean president may have different intentions than the previous president in dialogues with North Korea since he is from the opposition party and that initiatives taken by the previous Moon administration may be erased. Politics has changed in the United States as well with the different approaches by President Trump's and President Biden's administrations. He felt that the

meetings between Trump and Kim, and Moon and Kim were mostly symbolic. Of course, it was a strong symbol, but there were no real, concrete results. Strong symbols of the past, for example, are the 2019 Winter Olympics, where we remember that the sister of Kim Jung-un was invited by the president of South Korea. We remember the visit of Pres. Moon and the tour he did with Kim Jung-un taking pictures at various symbolic locations. Unfortunately, due to the COVID crisis and resistance on both side, nothing conclusive was established. He said, "On the other hand, I believe in symbols. Once you can put, in the same room, the presidents of the USA and of DPRK, and you see the president of South Korea implementing possible peace scenarios on the peninsula, that is an important symbol. Even if Joe Biden doesn't respect the initiatives of Trump, these symbols remain important."



That there are limitations to the power of the UN as shown by the UN's inability to stop the current Russian aggressions is apparent. We will need to see what the future intentions of incoming President Yoon are with regard to relationships with the US, China, Japan and North Korea. Under Trump, the North was quiet. But since Biden was elected, North Korea is insecure. A multilateral approach was offered with the Six Party Talks, but we have seen the limitations of this multi-lateral approach, although it should be continued. Six Party Talk is necessary but not sufficient. The UN therefore has a role to play. It can be a referee for dialogue on the peninsula. The problem with great powers is they have their own agenda and interests. The UN can be more neutral. What sort of UN are we thinking of? The Security Council has failed; those measures have not succeeded. Even in the UN General Assembly, we have seen the limits regarding the situation in Russia. We can see that it has limited impact.

The second speaker was Mr. **Doug Bandow**, senior fellow, The CATO Institute, Washington D.C. He stated that NE Asia is the epicenter of economic growth. At the same time, there is a growing concern over security issues and territorial disputes. Therefore, we cannot ignore addressing these issues even with the Ukraine/Russian situation.

He said there is not really an honest broker in the region to settle disputes, so we can look to the UN to play a role here. He emphasized that we have to try. The UN can bring countries like the US and China, and Japan and South Korea to dialogue and resolve their issues. He said, "The NE Asia is a region where someone needs to step in." Although the world's attention is on Europe, we need to discuss NE Asia as well. NE Asian issues can't be ignored. We need a broker that can step in and get people to talk. Even the friends of North Korea, like China and Russia, also have their own problems. Europe can't be seen as a neutral broker. So, in this situation the UN has to be looked at. The UN Security Council couldn't deal with the Russia situation since Russia is on the Security Council. Regional offices do exist in Africa and central Asia. These offices play a crucial role although they are not a panacea. A place on the DMZ would be a dramatic symbol of offices in both North and South Korea. NE Asia needs someone to step in and make progress. He concluded by saying, "We need to be creative and persistent. We cannot accept failure."

Dr. **Michael Jenkins**, president of the Universal Peace Federation International, led a question-and-answer session to conclude the program:

1. President Yoon has vowed to increase relations with Japan and be strong on North Korea.

Courmont: If Yoon continues with a policy aligned with the two previous conservative predecessors, I fear it will fail. We have the responsibility to assist South Korea to keep a dialogue with the North. I am against the idea of joining the Quad. It won't help. The problem with Japan is more societal than

geopolitical. My advice to the South is: don't stop the dialogue.

Bandow: I expect we will see the same from Yoon as we did with Pak before. I don't think that will bring good results. For the North, they felt that speaking with the South didn't work so they blew up the liaison office. If Yoon has a strong approach and no good proposal for good behavior, this will not work.



2. Who is against a regional office and why?

Courmont: I don't see anyone opposed to it. I don't see any particular resistance, except from the UN itself. The problem is related to what will be the agenda of such an office. If we used these offices to strengthen dialogue, then it can be useful. If the UN regional office is seen as a pressure against the North, it will fail.

Bandow: Other parts of Asia will also want one, so maybe we need a proposal with three to four regional offices. Kim Jung-un doesn't want to be controlled by China. What are the possibilities now, with the situation in Russia being supported by China? How can China help the USA to make peace on the peninsula?

China changed in 2018. China won't do a thing to help the US. The challenge is that the US and Europe are going after China because of their relationship with Russia. Will this make it more unlikely that China will help the USA to pacify the Peninsula? If we can't convince China that a unified peninsula is not a threat to them, there is no hope to get China's support.

3. Final thoughts and advice to the Biden Administration:

Bandow: Be persistent and look for creative avenues in other ways. That starts with South Korea. Ideas like a UN regional office can certainly be interesting. North Korea is a regime we don't like, but we have to show we can treat them with respect. We should get rid of the travel ban. We should talk to our enemies, which is more important than talking to our friends.

Courmont: I agree with what Doug said. Concerning dialogue, Biden should stop thinking that everything Trump did was stupid. This will help find ways for stronger dialogue.