

UPF Russia's second webinar on Prospects for Peace on the Korean Peninsula

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Moscow, Russia -- Universal Peace Federation held its second webinar on the theme "Prospects for Peace on the Korean Peninsula."

Background

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War. Countless people, under the banner of the United Nations or the banner of the communist world, sacrificed their lives. Today the Korean Peninsula is still divided.

The future of the Korean Peninsula, surrounded by four of the world's most powerful nations, will affect not only Northeast Asia but also peaceful sustainable development in many countries worldwide.

The year 2020 has been dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Geopolitics and the world economy are going through great changes. Has the prospect of peace on the Korean Peninsula come closer or not?

Panelists

Dr. Barthélemy Courmont, a professor of modern history and international relations at the Catholic University of Lille, France

Dr. Alexander Vorontsov, the head of the Department for Korean and Mongolian Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia

Jacques Marion, the co-chair of UPF for Europe, Eurasia and the Middle East

The moderator of the program, held on November 16, 2020, was Maria Nazarova, the president of UPF-Russia.

Each panelist gave a seven-minute presentation. The presentations were followed by a question-and-answer session.

Dr. Barthélemy Courmont started by describing the new dialogue between Pyongyang, Seoul and Washington since the election of South Korean President Jae-in Moon in 2017. Meetings have been held about the lifting of sanctions and the future development of the North Korean economy.

There also has been a very interesting move by the Trump administration, Dr. Courmont said. Initially the U.S. president was very tough on North Korea regarding the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Subsequently he took the South Korean policy vis-à-vis North Korea in his stride and met the North Korean leader three times. Dr. Courmont said the next U.S. administration should consider this legacy. It would avoid high tension between Washington and Pyongyang, provided the latter refrains from testing new missiles.

As to relations between the two Koreas, one has to wait for the presidential elections in 2022, Dr. Courmont said. The younger generation in South Korea is not interested in unification and is aware that it would come with a price tag. So far, President Jae-in Moon has not advocated unification, but rather the implementation of peace. The dialogue should be continued and lead to some concrete achievements, Dr. Courmont said.

The presence of major economic actors in the region may help to find a more coherent approach to North Korea, he said.



The next speaker was Dr. Alexander Vorontsov, who explained that President Donald Trump succeeded in meeting North Korean President Kim Jong-un in person three times. This is very important, because the "Korean problem" is much due to the mutual mistrust between Washington and Pyongyang, as well as between Pyongyang and Seoul. Dr. Vorontsov said he is not very optimistic about the future, as he thinks a Biden administration would try other ways to deal with North Korea.

Confucian ethics, and not only the authoritarian regime, enabled North Koreans to accept the extreme measures taken by the authorities to fight COVID-19. Also, in South Korea, the almost forgotten Confucian values, and the importance paid to collective behavior, helped them to fight the pandemic crisis very effectively. Moreover, thanks to special laws that South Korea adopted five years ago in dealing with the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemics, a very efficient application was used to fight COVID-19.

The present crisis has shown that common values are still deeply rooted in the conscience of both North Koreans and South Koreans, even though some believe that the two countries have grown too far apart to allow reunification.

The final speaker, Jacques Marion, shed some light on the vision of UPF co-founders Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon and his wife, Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon. Reverend Moon in his memoir described the central role his nation could play in the coming Asia-Pacific era. As a small nation surrounded by major powers -- China, Russia, Japan and the United States -- Korea can be compared to a machine's ball-bearing, i.e., the small part made of metallic balls around which other parts of the machine can move smoothly in all directions.

Reverend Moon envisioned that the unified Korean Peninsula would be the central link of an international highway or railway system connecting with Japan by an undersea tunnel and with Russia, China and the rest of the world by a highway. Further north, this highway system would meet the transcontinental link that would connect Russia and the Eurasian continent to the United States and Canada through a tunnel under the Bering Strait. This would create a transport infrastructure with an immense potential for economic development and cultural exchange at the heart of the Asia Pacific region.

UPF co-founder Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon has proposed that the United Nations establish a fifth headquarters at the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Korea. The UN currently has four headquarters throughout the world. In Asia, there is only one regional office in Bangkok, but no UN headquarters.

Question-and-answer session

Dr. Courmont was asked how relevant the Korean question is and will be for Europe -- or for France more specifically, as he is French -- and also what is needed to direct European attention and engagement to this issue.

Dr. Courmont answered that there is no cohesion among Europeans regarding the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Some countries are more interested or involved than others, for economic or strategic reasons. Several initiatives were supported in the past, such as the "Sunshine Policy" between the two Koreas. However, for the moment there is no clear vision.



France is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear power. It is therefore one of the major actors alongside the United States. And yet, it has no diplomatic relations with North Korea, while almost all the other European Union member states do. Hopefully, France will establish diplomatic relations as soon as an opportunity arises, Dr. Courmont said.

The degree to which Europe can contribute to peace on the Korean Peninsula largely depends on the margin that the United States will leave for other actors to participate in the dialogue, and also on how this will be received by North Korea.

Dr. Vorontsov was asked what Russia can contribute to enhance the chance for peace, given the fact that it has an interest in seeing a stable peninsula.

He said that the major players are the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the United States. From the Russian understanding, deep mistrust is the key reason for the situation, because the North Korean leadership is still convinced that the main goal of Washington is the liquidation of the DPRK.

When in 2003 North Korea decided to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the country was included in the "Axis of Evil" by the administration of George W. Bush. Dr. Vorontsov at that time pointed out the consequences to a senior North Korean diplomat. The latter replied that whether the country adhered to the NPT or not, nobody would come to the rescue of North Korea if the United States decided to attack it. For that reason, North Korea is determined to improve its defense system.

Russia supports the NPT and all other initiatives worldwide to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons. At the same time, it says that dialogue with North Korea, as an equal partner, is indispensable. North Korea's legitimate and major concern about security must be considered, Dr. Vorontsov said. North Korea realizes that it may have to live with economic sanctions for a long time. The people have learned to adapt their economy and to survive.

Jacques Marion was asked what non-governmental organizations can do to unify Korea. He answered that NGOs should focus on the human dimension behind all conflicts, as there is a lot of misunderstanding, especially about North Korea.