

Think Tank 2022: There's No Easy Way Forward

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It's a privilege to be with you today talking about such an important issue of which as a BBC correspondent and an author, I've written about and reported on for many decades. I'd like to thank the Universal Peace Federation for inviting me, because it was through UPF -- although it wasn't even called UPF then -- that I first went to North Korea in the mid-1990s, when there was a serious threat of war with the United States. I then witnessed, first-hand, how the predecessors of UPF worked around the clock to help defuse the crisis. It came just a few years after the Reverend and Mrs. Moon met the North Korean leader, Kim Il Sung, in 1991, which led to a range of initiatives which included the opening of a car factory in Nampo and a hotel and peace conference center, and the holding of a world peace conference. More recently, there's been an initiative to set up a United Nations headquarters in the demilitarized zone, between North and South. Drawing on experience of this long deadlock on Korean unification issues that create war and those that lead to peace, UPF is now active all over the world. Although top of the wish-list remains the unification of the Korean Peninsula.

I want to talk to you today of where that Korean conundrum, as I call it, sits geopolitically among the other global flash points, and how in the long-term, unification might best be achieved without conflict. If I go back to January 2017, and the handover of the presidency by Barack Obama to Donald Trump, where Obama warned that North Korea and its missiles would be his top national security threat... North Korea's missile program first became a threat in the 1990s with reports, never confirmed, that it was being designed by rogue Soviet scientists.

Later, after the collapse of communism, a Pakistani involvement too, is well documented. It carried out more than twenty missile tests during 2017. North Korea claimed to have achieved its aim of designing a missile and nuclear warhead that could reach Washington DC.

American attempts to pressure China into stopping North Korea had yielded little during that period of heightened tensions, and North Korea appear determined to keep going until it thought it had the nuclear deterrent it needed.

And there were knock-on problems with American and Western foreign policy that had been taking place elsewhere. Analysts frequently cited the examples of Iraq, Libya and Ukraine as countries that had forfeited their embryonic nuclear weapons program -- only to be invaded by foreign powers. So why would North Korea ever contemplate doing that?

As a short-term solution, back then in 2017, with the increased North Korean missile testing, South Korea deployed the US anti-missile defense systems designed to intercept and destroy missiles on their descent to target. This went some way to allay domestic fears about a missile strike, but it also caused friction with China, North Korea's ally, that viewed it as unnecessary and hostile. If we think back to that time, President Trump had just taken office. He was about to launch his much wider anti-China policy about trade and the rest of it. He had already ruffled feathers with his approach to Taiwan. The Korean challenge lay within that context.



A brief glimmer of hope

By early 2018, the US had drawn up detailed plans for special forces operations against nuclear facilities in North Korea, against the dystopian option of nuclear war, and of the destruction of Seoul in the first

house of any war. The Pentagon was beginning to accept that a forensic strike might be the least bad option. So, at this stage, the crisis was strong in China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, the United States, and we were all reading about it as the headlines of our newspapers. In a near unprecedented deployment, three US aircraft carrier groups were sent to the region. The UN imposed yet more sanctions on North Korea, backed by the nation's traditional allies, China and Russia.

Trump had made the fight personal, jeering at the North Korean leader Jong-un Kim, calling him "Little Rocketman" and warning that the United States would totally destroy his country. But he also chose to tackle the problem at source. He offered an olive branch, and there followed a series of one-on-one summits between the two leaders.

Trump and Jong-un Kim met first on June 12, 2018 in Singapore and in Vietnam February 27–28, 2019 and again in June 2019 along the demilitarized zone dividing North and South Korea. Now, analysts are going to argue what was not achieved and the failures of this and that, but Trump did succeed in removing Obama's Korean crisis from the top of his threat list. In conversations today, we hear far more about Russia, Ukraine, China, Xinjiang, the South China Sea and Hong Kong. And right up there every day is the threat against Taiwan. The Korean Peninsula isn't much there and this can only be a good thing.

The sometimes horrifying reality

The imminent threat of conflict might have diminished, but the underlying issues have not gone away. North Korea is controlled by an outdated, insular Stalinist-style family dynasty currently run by Jong-un Kim, who's only in his thirties. He inherited that mantle from his father, Jong-Il Kim who was son of the country's revered and very canny founder, Il-sung Kim, who started the Korean War in 1950 and met Reverend and Mrs. Moon in 1991.

The paradox of the situation is that Kim knows if he ever did directly threatened Japan, South Korea or the United States, his family regime would be unlikely to survive at all. The country is flanked to the north by its ally China to the south by its enemy South Korea and to the east, North Korea shares a short border with Russia. The Kim family has maintained control over North Korea's 25,000,000 people by repressing, threatening and isolating them— borders are kept closed, martial music and slogans and worship of the regime are embedded in the citizens from birth. Television, radio and the Internet are highly restricted. Some 150,000 (although nobody really knows) labor-camp prisoners live in a Soviet style gulag system, facing torture, execution... Threats of being sent to such a camp hang over every citizen. No one is exempt. After he inherited his presidency, Jong-un Kim executed his own uncle in 2014 together with an aunt and other relatives.

Let me repeat -- no one feels safe. I have some personal experience of these tactics during a visit in 1994. I interviewed a deputy minister who handled energy and nuclear issues. I tried to contact him later and was told that he had changed jobs. I learned he had actually been executed by firing squad.

By sealing itself off and instilling in people this idea that they lead perfect lives, the Kim family has created a bizarre social laboratory. In a weird way, it mirrors the South. They are, after all, all Koreans. South Korea has dazzled the world with its soft power influence, whether with automobiles, televisions, Gangnam Style dancing, its successful transition to democracy or the addictive Netflix series, Squid Games. North Korea has equally dazzled with its ability to defy global trends, keep its sanction-laden dictatorship alive, while also becoming a nuclear power and a training ground for some of the world's most skilled cyber hackers, and so on. North Koreans are motivated and disciplined; they have to be to outfox the regime and to survive. Those I've met are funny, clever, quick thinking. You can get yourselves into some wacky situations. There was a time -- I don't know if it still exists now -- that North Koreans were told that the Beatles had not broken up because they were coming to play for the Great Leader and that no man had ever walked on the moon because North Korea was going to get there first.

The North and the South might share a language, but it will take a long time to mesh the two current mindsets, as the South has found when resettling those who have escaped. So, what to do when after over seven decades and three generations of family dictators, the core of the North Korean regime stands unchanged? There is no easy way to bring it into the modern world. And thank goodness, the American people have now learned through the blood and horror of Afghanistan that democracy does not come with the raising of a new flag and the holding of an election. The South Koreans know from their experience that it's a lot harder than that.

North Korea has brought the world to the brink of war before, most seriously in 1994, when President Clinton drew up detailed strike plans, and with input from a forbearer of UPF, negotiated the Framework Agreement.

That was before North Korea had nuclear weapons. There was an idea then that if the US, in the international community, could guarantee North Korean energy supplies, it could, like China, reform and come in from the cold. That dream ended in 2002. The US accused North Korea of violating the agreement. President George W. Bush condemned the country as being part of the Axis of Evil.

This was in those grim, heady days after 9/11 and before the Iraq invasion, when Defense Secretary, the

late Donald Rumsfeld, famously said the US was capable of fighting wars on two fronts, Iraq and North Korea. He was wrong.

There are comparisons here with the current treaty around Iran's nuclear program, and a lesson. If we want to end the threat of a rogue state, we need to hold our nerve and stay the course. The US, as leader of the international community, cannot sign an agreement with one administration and pull out with the next. It's devastating for world leadership. Yes, North Korea was violating that Framework Agreement, but we should have worked around that, persuaded, coaxed, cajoled and stayed in the game of peace. Why? Because four years after tearing it up, North Korea carried out its first nuclear test.

North Korea is a difficult problem to handle

While Americans could intervene in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran -- the rest of it -- similar action in North Korea would be fraught with danger. And we should dash any thought of thinking or hoping for the disintegration of the regime that word, or phrase "regime change." None of the major regional powers have been able to agree on how to handle it.

Remember Iraq again. When we believed Britain, the United States and others had drawn up a plan on how to rebuild Iraq, bring democracy and we had not anticipated those scenarios of looting lawlessness and insurgency that should not have caught everyone by surprise, but they hadn't planned for it. Yes, Trump could carry out his threat to destroy the regime, but what then? I'll tell you a little bit of what's been discovered. Any strike on North Korea could be met with a barrage on Seoul, hundreds of artillery guns across North Korea, I mean thirty miles from the border. Estimates on their firing ability -- half a million shells in an hour, destroying the city.... There would also be risk of those shells carrying chemical nerve agents, BX and Saturn, of which North Korea has plentiful supplies.

Another scenario outlined in a Rand Corporation report looked at what might happen if Jong-un Kim were assassinated by a rival faction. With an ounce of trouble breaking out, four emergency elements would need to be handled by international powers. Refugees would have to head both north and south. To stop that, humanitarian aid would have to be delivered swiftly and in plentiful supply throughout the country. The second emergency measure, therefore, would be having to neutralize North Korea's air defense system to deliver that aid. That would require a military intervention agreed upon by China, South Korea and the United States. Each hour taken to arrange it, would worsen the humanitarian crisis. And there are no arrangements in place at the moment.

Beijing would insist on a buffer zone inside North Korea's northern border perhaps as deep as thirty miles, in which it would put its troops and weapons. South Korea views the North as its Korean sovereign territory.

So, would it agree? And finally... Everything's important; maybe this is the most important: North Korea's weapons of mass destruction would have to be secured rapidly to prevent them falling into the hands of terrorists or a North Korean faction that might use it in a civil war.

The governments involved have not agreed upon a formula of how to contain any collapse and a war game found that it would take 90,000 troops fifty-six days to secure those nuclear materials. So, what to do with no good scenario? My suggestion... I'm an author and a reporter. I would say give it time. Don't think that you can unify like Germany in months or years. Look at a fifty-year plan. You have to make sure that the North Korean elite do not feel in danger of a transition that's going to take place. For the leadership, it's a difficult and unpalatable thought to have when you think of the human rights abuses that will be exposed.

The only way to bring this about in a peaceful way is if North Korea reforms like China did (under the mentorship, I suspect, of China) so that North Korea's economy and its education system grows, gradually bringing in economic reform, until it opens up. China began in 1979, so we are looking at forty years to where it (China) is now.

And it's not a democracy. So, let's forget about this democracy element. The South and the North must merge in unification so that on both sides of the border, the day that it happens, everybody is going to wake up and go to work as if nothing much has changed.

None of that scenario sits well with Western democracies. Because as I explained at the beginning, one administration thinks this, there is an election, another administration thinks that. So there needs to be a general acceptance and agreement within those Western democracies that this is how this situation is going to unfold.

I'll finish on the biggest conundrum at the moment on this topic: How can North Korea be opened up, reform its economy, spread that wealth, whilst it is under sanctions? That's going to be the tricky one. That is the first hurdle to overcome. How are we going to open it up, improve the lives of North Koreans, spread that wealth and change mindsets? That's the conundrum. Thank you, Universal Peace Federation, so much for inviting me. And thank you all for listening.