

World Knowledge Forum 2012

North Korea Outlook 2013
Thursday, October 11, 2012

In one of the final sessions of the 13th World Knowledge Forum in Seoul, several experts on international relations met to discuss the outlook on the future of North Korea. Though the panelists agreed that much about the future is uncertain, there was a general consensus that the regime will inevitably collapse.

Former U.S. Ambassador Christopher Hill characterized both these positions with his belief that North Korea will eventually collapse. "When it happens, we will not have predicted how, and we will not have predicted when."

Mr. Hill, currently the Dean of International Relations at the University of Denver, was joined on the panel by Walter Lohman, Director of The Heritage Foundation's Asian Studies Center; Shen Dingli, Professor and Dean of International Studies at Fudan University in China; and Victor Cha, Professor and Director of the Government and Asian Studies Department at Georgetown University.

The panel began their discussion with the question of whether any reforms or opening of policy might be possible in North Korea, particularly in light of the recent ascension of leader Kim Jong Un. Dr. Shen believes that this possibility is slim, given the reclusive nation's limited resources and its sclerotic political system ruled by a cadre of elites. "If the elites have to choose, they want to be chosen first; they wonder why they should yield their own benefits to others," he said.

Dr. Cha highlighted the two primary obstacles to North Korean reform, listing "the absence of leaders that can make rational decisions about the state, and the lack of ability to signal the desire for reform credibly to the outside world." He said that the fundamental problem lies with the system itself because change is not inherent. "It's not a system geared for change; the only way to get change is if the system crumbles."

Given the instability of the current regime, Mr. Hill advises that "caution is order of the day, and we need to be attentive to whether there are changes there worth pursuing," although such a course will be difficult to assess, given the inability to get accurate information. As Dr. Shen describes the country, "It's a black hole, so it's hard to confirm anything."

Mr. Hill also lamented the difficulties of trying to develop a diplomatic relationship with North Korea, because they "seem to want these things, then get them and seem to not care, so you have to guess at what they really want. There's a reason that negotiations with North Korea are called the 'graveyard of diplomats.'"

The panel saw the issue of denuclearization of the peninsula as a particularly thorny diplomatic issue. In response to how North Korea might improve its economic situation, Mr. Hill emphatically replied that "one step that would have an instantaneously positive effect would be to get rid of nuclear weapons" because such an action would open the door for U.S. assistance.

Dr. Cha explained part of the reasons for North Korea's reluctance to follow such a recommendation. "The problem is that they don't want to trade; they want both. They want all the benefits that would come from an economic opening, but they also want some element of a nuclear deterrent." According to Dr. Cha, there is also the problem of inherent insecurity. "The nature of this regime is that it always feels insecure, so the nuclear program has become part of their identity."

Dr. Shen provided insights into the mindset of the North Korean regime as he addressed U.S. concerns that China is not doing enough to contain the North Korean nuclear program. "The U.S. wants China to control North Korea, but North Korea wants the U.S. to know that they can't be controlled. North Korea wants to present itself as an independent nation, so don't expect anyone, including China, to give them mandates."

Mr. Lohman also speculated about the potential actions of both the U.S. and China vis-à-vis North Korea. He recalled that with respect to the nuclear issue, "the U.S. and China were in fact adversaries in the National Security Council over this. We weren't friends, and we clashed." Given the very different interests of the U.S. and China in North Korea, he believes that "it would be more productive actually to go our separate ways on this issue."

The panel concluded by considering the future of the two Koreas and the possibility of a reunification of the peninsula. Mr. Hill felt that "at the end of the day, the Korean people will decide the issue of unification," adding that he "would not be surprised if out of the ruins of North Korea, a single Korean state were to emerge on the peninsula."

Until that time, however, it seems that the only certainty is the continued lack of certainty about the state of North Korea. As Dr. Cha concluded, "If North Korea were not here five years from now, I think we'd all be up here saying that we're not surprised. If it is still here five years from now, however, we'd also not be surprised."