

WKF Day 3 – Where is North Korea headed? By Theresa Arico

Moderator:

Yungwoo Chun – Korean Peninsula Future Forum, Chairman and Founder

Speaker:

Christopher Hill – University of Denver, Dean of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies

Haruki Wada – Tokyo University, Professor Emeritus

- Author of many books on North Korean history and NK-Japanese relations
- Pro-NK sentiments

Andrei Lankov – Kookmin University, Professor

Theirry de Montbrial – French Institute of International Relations, Executive Chairman

“Kim Jong Un wants to become North Korea’s Deng Xiao Ping,” said Professor Andrei Lankov of Kookmin University on the third day of the 16th annual World Knowledge Forum in Seoul. His comments came as he and a number of other panelists discussed recent economic reforms in North Korea and what they could mean for the future of the Kim regime.

Why is North Korea reforming now when, under the leadership of Kim Jong Il, reform was considered impossible? Mr. Thierry de Montbrial, executive chairman at the French Institute of International Relations, explained the regime’s decision by saying, “The real choice of the North Korean regime is to either not make reforms and then at some later date collapse in some unforeseeable way or to start to make reforms and risk collapsing immediately.” Professor Lankov explained further, “In a divided country, a country where a rich south and a very poor north coexist, such reforms are ideologically dangerous. At any moment, it can end up like East Germany.”

Professor Lankov, a long-time observer of North Korea, set the tone of the panel by explaining the reforms Kim Jong Un is pursuing. First of all, farmers are not being allowed to work for a portion of their own harvest; instead all of the harvest is being gathered and redistributed by the state. Factory managers are also being given more independence, and North Korea is even attempting to create new economic zones in order to encourage foreign investment. Most importantly, the regime has continued

to ignore the burgeoning, technically illegal, private economy, allowing small businesses to seek their own fortunes.

All of these reforms have resulted in a small amount of economic growth. However, they will not create a more politically liberal North Korea. “They must be very, very repressive. This is not because [Kim] is brutal. It is because he does not want to be killed.”

However, Christopher Hill, the former United States ambassador and current dean of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, was skeptical about the impact of the reforms. “The real question is...not whether they are engaged in...reform, but...whether they are prepared to be members of the international community. And the price of membership has to do with their insistence on nuclear weapons.” Many socialist states have, in fact, tried reforms in the past. However, those reforms were rarely successful in making substantial changes to the economy. “At the end of the day, what North Korea decided they really wanted was nuclear weapons.” And nuclear weapons is exactly what the United States has mandated it cannot have.

Haruki Wada, professor emeritus of Tokyo University, took issue with the U.S.’s insistence on the nuclear issue. “They think this is a huge handicap in their dealings with South Korea. This consciousness is interfering in sincere discussions with South Korea.”

Theirry de Montbrial, the executive chairman of the French Institute of International Relations, agreed that the nuclear issue is difficult to push. “North Korea will not give up nuclear weapons. The problem is that it is not a matter of the security of North Korea as a state. It is about the survival of the sect in power.” Furthermore, “They have to have nuclear weapons to make sure...the other powers do not do what the West did with Saddam Hussein and make a regime change.”

Ambassador Hill fired back, remarking, “Every time you say publicly that North Koreans will never give up their nuclear weapons, you essentially embolden [them] to never give up their nuclear weapons.”

The debate briefly touched upon China’s role in North Korea’s future, and all panelists agreed that China needs to play a more active role in managing the actions of its former ally.

So the question remains—just how long will the regime last? While Professor Lankov admitted that this is a question “no one can answer,” he tried nonetheless, stating, “I will be slightly surprised if North Korea is around by 2030.” Ambassador Hill agreed. Professor Wada explained that it would be possible for North Korea to survive, but only if they followed the models of China and Vietnam. Mr. de Montbrial was a bit more cautious, deciding it best to make no surmises. “In 1988,” he explained, “nobody thought the Soviet Union would collapse in the next two years.”