

Think Tank 2022 Forum Europe and the Middle East IMAP Session

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February 3, 2022

Europe and the Middle East -- "Assessing the Prospects of the Korean Presidential Election" was the theme of a virtual conference organized by the Europe and Middle East branch of the International Media Association for Peace (IMAP).

The webinar, held on February 3, 2022, was the seventh session of the Think Tank 2022 Global Forum, which itself is part of the 2022 World Summit to be held from February 10 to 13.

What will be the impact of the South Korean election, scheduled for March 9, 2022, on prospects for peace and unification on the Korean Peninsula? The panelists discussed the presidential candidates' positions toward North Korea as well as their own viewpoints about Korean reunification.

Peter Zoehrer, the coordinator of IMAP for Europe and the Middle East, opened the session by introducing the media association that was established in early 2020 by UPF co-founder Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon.

IMAP, Mr. Zoehrer said, is providing a platform for media professionals around the world. It stands for a free and independent press, fundamental human rights and accuracy in reporting. "IMAP also promotes family values, peacebuilding, intercultural dialogue and reconciliation," he said.

He then introduced the session moderator, **Rita Payne** from the United Kingdom, the former Asia editor for BBC World News (TV) and the president emeritus of the Commonwealth Journalists Association.

"The search for peace on the Korean Peninsula has been an elusive process," Mrs. Payne began. She acknowledged the efforts of UPF and IMAP to bring reconciliation between North and South Korea.

The first speaker was **Young-jin Oh**, the president and publisher of *The Korea Times*, an English-language daily newspaper published in South Korea.

Mr. Oh said that among the factors blocking Korean reunification is the "U.S.-China rivalry."

"For China, North Korea poses a dilemma," Mr. Oh said. "Pyongyang is needed to bolster its hand against the United States in the unfolding great game, but it is hard to control. And having an uncontrollable leader with his hands on the nuclear weapons next door is not a comforting thought. And the scenario of tens of thousands of North Koreans crossing the border into its territory when the regime collapses makes Beijing lose its sleep.

"Then could a united Korea be the answer? I think so. If united Korea follows the behavior pattern of united Germany, united Korea would focus on its own survival and prosperity. As Germany does, it would refrain from taking sides outright for both Washington and Beijing.

"A united Korea most likely will be more prosperous, will be a force to reckon with; then it will promote the balance of power in the region and help pave the way for lasting peace.

"A lot of aspects of what I said may sound like wishful thinking," Mr. Oh said, "but when you wish hard, sometimes you get your wish."

Mrs. Payne asked Mr. Oh about the nuclear threat from the North. He replied, "Left alone, North Korea's nuclear weapons would not pose as great a threat as people may think. North Korea knows ... that if it used nuclear weapons, North Korea would be destroyed outright. The usefulness in their nuclear weapons lies in not using them. Knowing that, would we be willing to go to war over weapons that have a greater chance of not being used?"

The next speaker, representing the North Korean point of view, was **Dr. Felix Petrovich Kim** from Russia, the head of the board of trustees of the Russian information service known as Korean Radio. Dr. Kim, who is also a surgeon and a professor, appeared at the last minute when the scheduled speaker, Andrey Shin, the editor-in-chief of Korean Radio, couldn't participate because of sudden illness.

Dr. Kim explained: "I represent Koreans in Russia. We established our own international mass media outlet that's called Korean Radio. We are trying to present our point of view. We are North Koreans in Russia. From Korean Radio you can learn the truth about what is going on inside North Korea."

Referring to a comment made by the previous speaker, Young-jin Oh, Dr. Kim said that the German

model of reunification would not be acceptable for North and South reunification. "Kim Il Sung [the first leader of North Korea] suggested unification through consolidation and federation with equal rights; then we can unite. Then [Kim Il Sung] suggested to create a confederation, in which each part would decide its foreign policy and economic policy. For example, free market economy in the south, state economy in the north. But for international communication and cooperation there would be one unified state. But in order to achieve that, we should really work hard."

Regarding the nuclear threat, Dr. Kim said the United States' nuclear arsenal in South Korea is what pushed the North to create its own nuclear arsenal. After former President Kim Jong Il officially withdrew North Korea from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, North Korea started to create nuclear weapons.

Dr. Kim said: "I think the unification and peace between two Koreas is an issue of the two Koreas. ... I think Koreans can communicate with each other, can make negotiations, and can find peace and unification. The only thing that is necessary for that is that the United States would withdraw their troops from South Korean land."

Chad O'Carroll from the United Kingdom, the chief executive officer of the Seoul-based news and information service Korea Risk Group (NK-News), compared the two leading candidates for the South Korean presidency -- the conservative Yoon Seok-youl of the People Power Party and the liberal Lee Jae-myung of the Democratic Party -- in terms of their stance toward North Korea:

"Broadly speaking, I'd say that both are relatively pro-engagement and are focused on constructive ways to find peace with Kim Jong Un and the North Korean government, but there are important differences."

He explained that Yoon Seok-youl, the conservative candidate, has criticized the efforts of the Moon Jae-in administration to secure an end-of-war declaration even before North Korea denuclearizes. Mr. Yoon also criticized the inter-Korean agreements signed during the summit of 2018. However, he is open to an inter-Korean peace treaty and to unilateral economic aid to North Korea and is even open to facilitating North Korean participation in the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. He's also keen to support sanctions exemptions. But he would support these economic incentives only if the North makes substantial progress toward denuclearization -- "and that's always been a very tough nut to crack," Mr. O'Carroll said.

He also explained that Mr. Yoon is for modernizing the military, engaging in more deterrents, and coordinating training exercises with the United States.

Mr. O'Carroll said it's interesting that Mr. Yoon would be open to relaxing some of South Korea's laws on inter-Korean broadcasting and communication. In South Korea it's very difficult to access North Korean media, and there are laws against it. Mr. Yoon has said that if there is reciprocity, he'd be willing to amend those laws, "which would really be a game-changer for inter-Korean cooperation."

Mr. O'Carroll said that Lee Jae-myung, the liberal candidate, is in favor of mirroring most of the policies of incumbent President Moon Jae-in. Mr. Lee is a big supporter of President Moon's military modernization plans. "One big difference is that he's keen to find ways to respond more robustly to future North Korean military events like missile and nuclear weapon tests," Mr. O'Carroll said.

"Interestingly, on unification [Mr. Lee] said ideological competition with the North and unification policy premised on Koreans being a homogeneous ethnic group are outdated. He stressed instead that there needs to be a more practical policy direction that can persuade the South Korean public of the need to unify. This can be done through inter-Korean tourism and increased cooperation. These are all things that President Moon Jae-in has been trying to do, but unfortunately inter-Korean relations have taken several hits in the past couple of years that have obstructed progress in this area."

Mr. O'Carroll said there are several key obstacles ahead. "North Korea has isolated itself a lot with Covid-19. There are no vaccinations in all of North Korea, so it's very hard to conceive of North Korean officials engaging in physical diplomacy with South Korea any time soon. It's also hard to imagine how North Korea would receive any humanitarian aid from South Korea any time soon," because with the Covid isolation there are no NGOs or United Nations staff left in North Korea. Thirdly, the international sanctions regime is now so comprehensive that it prevents inter-Korean initiatives except for verbal ones.

Another obstacle is the geopolitical competition between China and the United States, he said. North Korea has been on the side of China, especially in the last two years. Before Covid, China facilitated an increase in Chinese tourism to North Korea as well as Chinese economic and humanitarian aid.

"Because of that, North Korea has no need to accept South Korean offers of aid or engagement, because they usually come with higher standards of monitoring. If this trend continues, it may make it harder for the two Koreas to cooperate directly," Mr. O'Carroll said.

The final speaker was **Ambassador Warwick Morris**, a former ambassador of the United Kingdom to the Republic of Korea. A diplomat for nearly 40 years, he was stationed in South Korea for a total of 13 years and made two working visits to North Korea.

"I sometimes think I've been dealing with Korea too long," Mr. Morris said with a smile. "I'm becoming a bit skeptical about prospects for reunification." However, he said it's an important topic, which should be discussed.

This election is unusual, he said, in that neither of the two leading candidates is a politician: Lee Jae-myung is the governor of a province, and Yoon Seok-youl is the prosecutor general. It is also unusual because the incumbent, President Moon Jae-in, still enjoys a lot of popularity, which Mr. Morris attributed partly to the president's efforts to deal with North Korea over the years.

The ambassador said that the two candidates are very close in the opinion polls.

He mentioned that with each presidential election, South Koreans usually vote for a different party. However, he said, "My money is on Mr. Lee. He's from the same party as Moon Jae-in, so that would be a little unusual."

If Mr. Lee is elected, he would have a similar outlook to Moon Jae-in, Mr. Morris said.

Concerning the issue of a peace treaty, he said, "I'm not sure what it would achieve and what it would lead to, and whether it would change anything."

Mr. Morris asked: "Do the people of South Korea want reunification? Do they want it in their lifetime?" He reminded the audience that there are very few South Koreans still alive who have a strong personal link to North Korea.

When Germany reunited in 1990, young South Koreans were shocked to observe how expensive it was for the prosperous West Germany to absorb East Germany, and they realized that Korean reunification also would be hugely expensive. "There's an enormous cost factor in any reunification scenario, and I'm not sure what percentage of South Koreans today want to see reunification in their lifetime," Mr. Morris said.

In the mid-1970s when Mr. Morris first lived in South Korea, the threat of war with the North was much more obvious, with "monthly air raid practices and daily curfews, a real fear of invasion and attacks from the North, tunnels being found, incidents with submarines. That was a really dangerous era. Nowadays, South Korea is not like that," he said. Even though North Korea has nuclear weapons and is launching missiles almost weekly, "life goes on. People accept these as part of daily life."

Ambassador Morris said that because of these factors, he does not believe that reunification will happen in the near future. "But it's right to try. It's right to build links."

He recalled the "Sunshine Policy" implemented by former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, with many exchanges between North and South. However, Mr. Morris said, "In the end, they came to naught."

"I'm not sure what North Korea really wants," he said. "I think, in a word, it wants to overcome the South. That is its policy. And I just don't see that happening."

Moderator Rita Payne thanked all four presenters. "What's been running through these presentations is this strand of hard realism," she said. "Everybody wants peace, but the path is not going to be easy."

A lively discussion took place among the speakers during the question-and-answer session.

Dr. Felix Kim said: "North Korea will not attack South Korea. They don't want another war because their brothers and sisters are there."

Dr. Kim said that if the United States withdraws its troops from the South, that will facilitate the peace process.

Young-jin Oh responded to Dr. Kim's comment by saying that the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea was not a unilateral arrangement but rather a consensus of both South Korea and the United States. Even though some South Koreans want to see U.S. troops leave, "I think the majority of South Koreans believe the U.S. troops should stay. The reason for that is South Koreans do not believe in North Korea's intention."

Mr. Oh reminded the audience that the Korean War was started by the invasion of North Korea at the start of the Cold War with the support of the Soviet Union and China. "Even though there are dwindling

numbers of people who remember that, it still remains in the history books. And we learn from the history books that we cannot trust the North Koreans entirely now."

Mr. Oh said, "If North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons, we may be tempted to believe what the North Koreans say about the necessity of U.S. troops withdrawing as a condition to the two nations' unification."

Dr. Kim replied to Mr. Oh: "The Korean War was started by the United States." He also said, "Nuclear weapons are protecting the North from invasion by other nations."

Ambassador Warwick Morris said: "China is critical to North Korea. North Korea is dependent on China for almost all its trade and for its oil. If China were to tire of North Korea's missile testing and the treatment that is meted out to its people and were to turn off the tap regarding trade and oil, North Korea couldn't continue and would collapse."

Currently China is adamantly opposed to having a democratic, unified Korea on its doorstep, Mr. Morris said. However, in 10 years, when China is more confident of its position, it may not be so bothered about having a democratic neighbor.

The four speakers then were asked to give brief closing statements.

Chad O'Connell said that since the outbreak of Covid there has been "a massive increase" in North Korean campaigns for ideological purity. There has been legislation that can lead to the death penalty for anyone consuming South Korean media products. There is a huge fear in North Korea of ideological pollution from South Korean culture.

Dr. Felix Kim thanked UPF and IMAP for holding this virtual conference. He said it's very important to have webinars to share honestly with each other about our points of view and our problems. In conclusion, he expressed his belief that Korea will be united, whether in the near future or the distant future, but it will be one country.

Ambassador Warwick Morris said: "In spite of my skepticism, I do hope that whoever becomes president will not give up trying to build bridges. ... I think all parties should find ways of building trust. Trust-building is crucial and has got to be the first step."

Young-jin Oh said: "As the other panelists said, patience is very important. Seventy years we've been in this situation. It may take another 70 years to get things settled. That's the kind of attitude that we need. We can't make haste. If we must make haste, we should make haste slowly."

In his closing remarks, Peter Zoehrer of IMAP said, "I think there was a lot of hope in the closing statements."

He reported that the webinar had attracted almost 300 viewers on Zoom and several thousand views via social media, and he invited the participants to the 2022 World Summit, scheduled to take place from February 10 to 13, in Seoul, South Korea, and online.