

UPF Europe and the Middle East ILC: Biden Administration and the Reunification of Korea

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Europe and the Middle East - The fourth session of the June 2021 International Leadership Conference was "Biden Administration Policies and the Reunification of the Korean Peninsula."

The June 29 session was one of six ILC webinars that were held from June 24 to 30, 2021, under the theme of "Toward Peaceful Reunification of the Korean Peninsula."

UPF and The Washington Times Foundation organized the session to focus on diplomatic steps being taken by the new administration of the United States to improve relations between North and South Korea.

As the moderator, Kaeleigh Moffitt, the congressional liaison of UPF, gave a brief introduction to the topic.

Speakers



Hon. Dan Burton, member of the U.S. House of Representatives (1983-2013)

Harry Kazianis, senior director of Korean studies at the Center for the National Interest, United States

Dr. Barthélemy Courmont, senior research fellow, Institute of International and Strategic Relations, France



Dr. Alexander Vorontsov, chairman, Department for Korean and Mongolian Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences; associate professor, Moscow State Institute of International Relations

Hon. Dan Burton explained that the Biden Administration - though indirectly - has had an effect on possible Korean reunification in many ways. The utmost priority of this administration, Mr. Burton said, is stabilizing the United States enough so that it can extend its influence abroad. He pointed out the potential risks caused by the ever-increasing national debt, fueled by the administration's attempts to keep the economy afloat.

In addition, he said, the decision to cut the military budget is diminishing the United States' ability to protect its interests abroad. Mr. Burton pointed out the rapid militarization of China by comparison.

A crucial factor for the reunification of the Korean Peninsula, Mr. Burton said, is a consistent U.S. foreign policy with North Korea and a working dialogue. "That lets our adversaries know that we are prepared to do what is necessary, and lets our friends know that we are there with them if we are needed," he said. The Trump Administration attempted this, but the Biden Administration has not done so, he said.

The former U.S. congressman voiced his concerns about the current administration's stance toward Israel. Not only is the Biden Administration not supporting Israel in defending its sovereignty but also is siding with what Mr. Biden called the terrorist organization Hamas in denouncing Israel.

Answering a question from the audience regarding the possibility of non-sanction-based constructive cooperation between the United States and the DPRK, Mr. Burton pointed out the importance of having in-person meetings between the leaders of the two countries. He mentioned possible economic support, but underlined that the prerequisite for any sort of deal is the face-to-face meeting.

In his closing remarks, Mr. Burton stated that technology has the power to end nuclear weapons, referring to the Strategic Defense Initiative - the so-called "Star Wars" plan proposed by the Reagan Administration - that had the potential to make nuclear weapons obsolete.

Harry Kazianis opened by reiterating Congressman Burton's thoughts about the Trump Administration's progress in developing a stable relationship with the DPRK, which reached a dead-end with the coming of the Biden Administration. He pointed out that although the dialogue between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un was indeed more symbolic than practical - it did not trigger denuclearization - it was a beginning. He also pointed out that the sudden drop in foreign policy activity was largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced both the United States and the DPRK to turn inward rather than outward.

Mr. Kazianis explained the political nature of the issue, pointing out that the Biden Administration is in its early stages and is looking for opportunities to legitimize its policy. Given the well-known questionable trustworthiness of the DPRK, the president most probably would not look to reopen risky negotiations that lack political capital right now.

On the topic of reunification Mr. Kazianis stated his firm belief that the Korean people will reunite, while predicting that this event will not take place in the foreseeable future. It is probable, he said, that a sudden change may occur due to the collapse of the Kim regime, a collapse he attributed to its rigid structure and resistance to reforms. "When the regime does fall apart ... it is going to be sudden, and I think it will be the greatest international crisis we face today," Mr. Kazianis concluded. He listed the potential challenges stemming from the event, after which the international community would need to act quickly and effectively to secure nuclear weapons and help rebuild the society.



During the question-and-answer session Mr. Kazianis mentioned the importance of issuing a formal declaration ending the Korean War. That could be a good trigger for dialogue between the DPRK and the United States and also could serve as political capital for Kim Jong Un, who would be able to state that he did something that no other DPRK leader had been able to do.

In concluding his presentation, Mr. Kazianis pointed out that as the world emerges from quarantine, North Korea also will slowly go back to its previous practices such as weapons testing, so the world should be ready to handle the next steps of the DPRK effect on the international system.

Joining the discussion from a European perspective, Dr. Barthelémy Courmont invoked the seemingly new face of the United States as presented by President Biden during his meetings with world leaders, including President Moon Jae-in of South Korea. "We saw a lot of smiles, good intentions, lots of promises when it comes to multilateralism, for instance, but in the end we also saw the limits of this administration," Dr. Courmont noted. He pointed out that the frequently mentioned and widely supported idea of North Korean denuclearization during the Biden presidency lacks credibility due to the ongoing geopolitical struggle of regional actors, such as China. He explained that North Korea does not have any interest in the United States at this time, as its priority is survival, which can be achieved only through relying on nuclear power. "We know they have nuclear weapons, and we know why they want to keep this arsenal: precisely to survive," he added.

Dr. Courmont noted that neither the Bush Administration nor the Obama Administration brought about real dialogue with the DPRK, and that is why the Trump Administration's decision to meet Kim Jong Un - which was heavily criticized in Europe - broke this status quo. With due fairness, Dr. Courmont pointed out that these meetings lacked an agenda or a vision for the region, but, as he put it, "At least they met." He also stated that this is something that cannot be expected from the Biden presidency in the next four years.

Talking about the possibility of reunification, Dr. Courmont brought a sociological aspect into the dialogue, one based on his own experience teaching in South Korea. He explained that when asked about it, all of his Korean students said they supported the idea of reunification, but were not necessarily ready to deal with its consequences. When he asked them whether they would be ready to consider their northern brothers as equals, to spend a lot of money to rebuild the country, or simply acknowledge their right to vote which would change the political landscape completely, their answer was, "Well, we would love to, but we are not ready for it."

In conclusion, Dr. Courmont explained that the upcoming elections in South Korea may be a game-changer in the relationship between the two Koreas, as the future government must decide to build its North policy either on dialogue or on pre-determined demands. "Is the future of South Korea to be based on a stronger, solid, peaceful dialogue with North Korea, or, alternatively, are we going to be reverting to the stance of the Biden Administration and insisting on certain demands concerning North Korea's nuclear arsenal?"

During the question-and-answer session Dr. Courmont elaborated on the fact that there are not many possible solutions for handling the dispute with North Korea without resorting to sanctions. He stressed the importance of keeping such sanctions in place to sustain pressure on the country through comprehensive international cooperation, making sure all actors "play the game right." He noted, however, that sanctions alone won't bring about democratization, but that they can be used as a tool of negotiation.



In his closing remarks Dr. Courmont underlined the importance of dialogue and presenting different perspectives on the topic of Korean unification. He noted that the panel itself reflected the diversity required to keep the discussion alive.

The final presentation was given by Dr. Alexander Vorontsov. He agreed with the previous panelists that the Biden Administration is taking a step-by-step new approach, in which complete denuclearization is a remote possibility. However, he questioned whether this was sufficient to restart the dialogue.

Both sides are waiting for the other to take the first step, he said, but neither is ready to do so. However, practical steps are important, he said. North Korea says that it unilaterally destroyed part of its nuclear infrastructure before the Hanoi summit of February 2019, and it expects something in return, i.e., some practical steps on the U.S. side. On the other hand, the United States says that it has appointed a special envoy to North Korea, Mr. Sung Kim. This is already a significant step - although for Mr. Kim, it is only a part-time work because he remains the U.S. ambassador to Indonesia.

As a first step toward reunification, inter-Korean communication should be restarted, Dr. Vorontsov said. South Korea has attempted this, but so far the North Koreans have refused. The reason for this lies in the three inter-Korean summits, in which far-reaching promises were made, vivid declarations of friendship and cooperation were made, but cooperation itself was never resumed in practice, which led to deep disappointment on the North Korean side.

This could be blamed on the Trump Administration, because the North Koreans expect some practical steps in the area of inter-Korean economic cooperation to be approved by the Americans. The approach of the United States and South Korea has been to apply maximum pressure on North Korea, but this approach has failed. The question is whether the Biden Administration will allow South Korea to do something different. Some practical steps are needed, and this would be very important both for US-DPRK relations and ROK-DPRK relations.

Nevertheless, thanks to President Trump, some modest but practical progress was achieved, Dr. Vorontsov said. The situation on the Korean Peninsula is relatively stable. There are no long-range missile tests on the North Korean side, and no large-scale military drills in South Korea. Russia and China both support the principle of nuclear non-proliferation.

What is achievable is to preserve the present, relatively calm situation, because this can help to prevent North Korea from conducting further nuclear or long-range missile tests, Dr. Vorontsov said. In the present situation, there is a cap on further missile development, and this is very important, because if the North Koreans continue to develop this technology, the process will be irreversible. So it is important to at least try to maintain this situation. This is a modest but practical and achievable result, he said.

As regards the prospects for unification, the United States tried to isolate North Korea, to prevent North Koreans from working in other countries. An example of this is when a husband is working in another country, such as Russia, and sends money to his wife in North Korea, allowing her to start a small business. It was a source of market economy in North Korea. However, this has now largely stopped. The question is whether the Biden Administration is ready to soften the sanctions - although without sanctions there is no hope for the resumption of dialogue.

Dr. Vorontsov said the only way forward would be the long-term coexistence of the two Koreas, during which time they would cooperate economically through a gradual process of engagement, such as took place in the period of ROK Presidents [Kim Dae-jung](#) (1998-2003) and [Roh Moo-hyun](#) (2003-2008) and through the broad set of agreements that were signed at the 2007 inter-Korean summit.



Closing remarks

Congressman Burton promoted the idea of the Strategic Defense Initiative, originally developed under President Reagan to shoot down incoming missiles. He believes that with today's technology, this initiative could be reactivated, and it would make nuclear weapons and the missiles carrying them obsolete.

Dr. Courmont described his experience of three years in the South Korean city of Chuncheon near the 38th parallel, during which time he was asked to give a class on inter-Korean relations, because they wanted to have an "outside" viewpoint. He said that this panel reminded him of the importance of maintaining dialogue on this issue.

Dr. Vorontsov explained that when he was a visiting professor in South Korea teaching foreign studies, he met a young Russian student on the street who had studied at the same Moscow university from which he graduated. Dr. Vorontsov said he was shocked because this student's impression of South Korea in the year 2000 was similar to his own impression when he was in North Korea 20 years earlier, in the sense that both countries have a collective way of life stemming from Confucianism. This gives him hope that despite all the differences, unification is possible further down the road, he said.

Mr. Kazianis' final words were that we should "stay tuned." North Korea currently is suffering from challenges it hasn't had to face since the 1990s, including famine, typhoons, environmental problems, and stability issues with the regime. Just as with the collapse of the Soviet Union, we don't know how stable such a regime is. In conclusion, Mr. Kazianis said he was not predicting the collapse of the North Korean regime, but said that there definitely are problems ahead. "Just because they haven't tested any weapons recently doesn't mean they won't in the near future," he warned.