

North Korean Security: Inside Out

EIAS Briefing Seminar

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On the 4th of March, the European Institute for Asian Studies hosted an event concerning North Korean security. This event aimed to provide both external and internal perspectives on the situation in North Korea and discuss the possibility of the DPRK transitioning from a state with tight state security into a moderate and rational international actor. The speakers for the event were Mr Charles von Denkowski, H.E. Mr Brian McDonald and Dr Tongfi Kim. Mr David Fouquet acted as the moderator.

Introduction by

Mr David Fouquet, Senior Associate, European Institute for Asian Studies

Mr David Fouquet briefly spoke on the subject at hand, highlighting how he hoped this event will help bridge a complicated dichotomy surrounding North Korea. An essential consideration concerning the possible trajectory of North Korea questions whether such a tightly policed security state can transition into a more moderate kind of system. He mentions that there have been other countries such as Myanmar and even South Korea which were able to make such a transition. The question remains whether it is possible for North Korea to follow this example.

Mr David Fouquet then introduced the first speaker Mr Charles von Denkowski, Advisor to the Transitional Justice Working Group of Seoul & the Saram Foundation of Berlin, to provide the keynote address.

Keynote address by

Mr Charles A. von Denkowski, Advisor to the Transitional Justice Working Group of Seoul & the Saram Foundation of Berlin

Mr von Denkowski's doctorate thesis aimed to better understand North Korean state crime. Whereas the relationship between the West and North Korea has been increasingly positive after recent summits in Singapore and Hanoi respectively, crimes against humanity are still being committed within the northern part of the peninsula.

Mr von Denkowski explained that making up the backbone of his thesis on North Korea is the numerous in-depth interviews with former North Korean government personnel he had conducted over the course of a few years. He deliberately chose to speak with government personnel, rather than with the victims of the regime. This was because previous research on North Korean victims has been dismissed due to a number of false statements made by defectors in the past.

Mr von Denkowski explained that from the interviews he conducted, he gathered information suggesting that the majority crimes against humanity committed in North Korea result from unlawful formal social control at the hands of the Ministry of State Security (MSS). There are criminal procedural laws that exist in North Korea, but they are not applied for political reasons. Due to this, the MSS personnel have carried out human rights crimes such as arbitrary detention, torture, forced confessions, unlawful total surveillance, unlawful house searches and unlawful executions on behalf of the

government. The logic behind this suggests that without the MSS carrying out this unlawful repression and violence, the Kim family would face revolts within the party and the North Korean society.

According to Mr von Denkowski's research, some of the motives behind the human rights abuses lie within the culture within the MSS, in which victims are dehumanised and seen as objects rather than people. In Mr von Denkowski's opinion, this kind of culture puts a strain on the North Korean society as well as the policing of the North Korean State Security.

There have also been unverified allegations of human rights crimes including testing chemical weapons on prisoners. One former state security agent Mr von Denkowski interviewed claimed to have witnessed prisoners choking and foaming from their mouth after the military tested substances on them. Although these are unverified, this is just one of many allegations of human rights crimes in North Korea.

Mr von Denkowski has been told about instances where pregnant North Korean women who had to come back from China were forced to have abortions for supposedly carrying a Chinese baby. The decision to force abortions upon women returning pregnant from China was supposedly taken to reduce the number of additional people to feed (in light of the ongoing problems of famine and food shortage in the DPRK) as well as to keep the North Korean blood pure. He states that NGOs have to verify incidents like these in the future.

Although an economic transition in North Korea is currently underway - with a rising number of private entrepreneurs and small businesses, etc. - there has not been any accompanying social transition linked to human rights yet. Mr von Denkowski is interested in how a transitional justice system can be developed in North Korea. There are efforts from the UN and NGOs to promote transitional justice in North Korea through projects providing humanitarian aid and other support. Some examples include delivering food, medical supplies, supporting agriculture, developing schools for the handicapped, etc.

He believes that the work done by the UN and NGOs in North Korea is a step in the right direction. Without transitional justice, Mr von Denkowski states, there will be no harmony in the future in the North Korean society, neither will there be any sustainable relations with South Korea. He brought his presentation to a conclusion by mentioning that China has become an institutional victim to the illegal trading activities that are happening along the Sino-North Korean border.

Panel discussion by

H.E. Mr Brian McDonald, Former Head of the Delegation of the European Commission in Korea

The next speaker was H.E. Mr Brian McDonald, the Former Head of the Delegation of the European Commission to Korea. H.E. Mr McDonald started off by stating that everything in North Korea, including the people, are extremely controlled. He said that they have a very repressive system as he recalled several experiences during his visit to North Korea. He mentioned one occasion when a man working for the North Korean Foreign Ministry that he talked to had to go through a "brainwashing" session after being exposed to western visitors.

There are some interesting elements in the field of economic field in North Korea, in the sense that they have a very good investment hold. They are keen to attract workers to their shores, but an issue emerges concerning the lack of freedom the workers would have. The state can control what the workers are doing or have to do and there are no rules or laws against that.

H.E. Mr Brian McDonald is pleasantly surprised by the progress made with regards to the denuclearisation issue. Last year, he was becoming concerned about the aggressive language used by Donald Trump directed towards Kim Jong Un. Containment and deterrence is the best formula to deal with dictators such as Kim Jong Un who are usually described as irrational, impulsive and dangerous, H.E. Mr McDonald stated.

The aggressive behaviour from Donald Trump appeared to be a major step back towards the philosophy of neoconservatives. Mr Norman Podhoretz, a leading neoconservative, had insisted in his book that the USA should attack North Korea. H.E. Mr McDonald does not think that Donald Trump is following this philosophy and sees his behaviour as "more of a bark than bite". How the relationship between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un develops from now will be very important.

H.E. Mr Brian McDonald believes that the North Koreans were interested in an agreement on the nuclear issue as they were a willing party in the 1994 framework agreement between USA and North Korea. This agreement was meant to stop the operation and construction of nuclear reactors, which were suspected of being a part of a North Korean nuclear weapons program, in exchange for two proliferation resistant nuclear reactors. This framework agreement ended due to the change in administration. He states that it is not the Bush administration that caused the end of the framework agreement – notwithstanding they failed to show any enthusiasm or interest towards the matter. The

USA chose to call a halt to the framework agreement, causing North Korea to test bombs again, the first of which was detonated in 2006.

North Korea were also quite cooperative regarding the Six-Party Talks, which was a larger process held to disassemble North Korea's nuclear program. The failure of the Six-Party Talks seems to have come from the difficulties in agreeing on a verification system, but H.E. Mr McDonald believes that this was not the sole reason. It was also because there was no real commitment from the American side to the final, more political phase of the negotiations.

If an agreement between the USA and North Korea is to succeed, H.E. Mr McDonald stated, there would need to be security guarantees. Furthermore, he noted that the best way to make an agreement would be to first agree on security guarantees as well issues over sanctions.

Unlike many experts, H.E. Mr McDonald believes that North Korea would probably agree to denuclearise if the price is right concerning security guarantees. North Korea would ask for the joint military exercises between South Korea and US to be reduced as well as the US troops to be withdrawn from the Korean peninsula.

H.E. Mr Brian McDonald concluded by saying that it is unfortunate that the summit in Hanoi has failed. The summit seems to have focused too much on denuclearisation from the American side, while the North Koreans were looking for the removal of sanctions imposed in 2016. He concluded by saying that it was surprising how much misunderstanding there was between both parties leading to the summit.

Dr Tongfi Kim, Senior Researcher, VUB Korea Chair

Our last speaker was Dr Tongfi Kim, Senior Researcher at the VUB Korea Chair. His presentation centred on the external and international security matters of North Korea as well as the Hanoi summit.

Dr Tongfi Kim stated that he was rather disappointed by the outcome of the Hanoi summit because there could have been at least a limited but meaningful agreement concluded. Unlike in the past, there were mutual concessions that had be made from both parties. He believes that Donald Trump, unlike many of his predecessors, was eager to achieve some sort of deal with the North Koreans. On the other hand, North Koreans were always eager to make a deal with the US, even as early as in the 1990s.

Possible concessions from the US side could have included a declaration to end the Korean war, a possible international peace treaty, or limited sanctions relief related to North Korea. Equally, the possible concessions from the North Korean's may have included the dismantlement of nuclear facilities and nuclear sites, continued suspension of nuclear and missile tests accompanied by international inspections, etc. Despite the promise in the lead up to the summit, negotiations ended as they had begun, and nothing new was agreed upon. Although nothing was agreed during the negotiations in the Hanoi summit, Dr Tongfi Kim does not believe that high tensions between the US and North Korea will return.

Unlike H.E. Mr Brian McDonald, Dr Tongfi Kim is very sceptical that Kim Jong Un will agree to denuclearise, because his power would likely decrease once North Korea abandons its nuclear weapons. It is very risky for Kim Jong Un to give up nuclear weapons without the guarantee that the agreement will continue long into the future. He believes that there can be agreements made in the future where the threat of North Korea's nuclear weapons is limited, as well as the USA being prepared to make long term commitments. However, this would still be very different from the complete nuclear disarmament of North Korea that the US is looking for.

Dr Tongfi Kim concluded his speech by stating that the most important thing would be to avoid high tensions between the USA and North Korea like those of 2017. The next step would be to make incremental progress in order to reduce North Korea's nuclear threat and move towards forming long-term cooperation between the USA with North Korea. He would also personally like to see a US liaison office in Pyongyang, which he believes would be an important sign of commitment from the USA. Finally, Dr Kim would also like to see North Korea make a reversible but verifiable step towards nuclear disarmament.

Report written by Ashish Thapa

