

Crisis on the Korean Peninsula

Panel: Plenary Session I (Grand Ballroom)

Date/Time: April 25, 2012 / 14:15-15:30

Organizing Institution: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Speakers: David Sanger, *The New York Times* (moderator)

Christopher Hill, University of Denver

Vasily Mikheev, IMEMO

Pan Zhenqiang, China Reform Forum

Kim Tae-woo, Korea Institute for National Unification

Izume Hajime, Shizuoka University

Panel Short Summary

Amy Studdart, German Marshall Fund of the United States
Kyungtae Kim, Seoul National University

While the first panel at the Asan Plenum, ‘the crisis on the Korean peninsula’, was characterized by controversy and disagreement between panelists, it began with a consensus: the conversation with and about North Korea has been going around in circles for decades, to the frustration of all the parties involved. The North Korean rocket launch on April 20, the announcement of which breached the U.S.-North Korean agreement reached in February only two weeks after it was signed, was only the latest in a long cycle of, as David Sanger of *The New York Times* put it, ‘an agreement reached, an agreement breached.’ With the crisis on the peninsula cycling back repeatedly, is there any hope for progress?

The Six-Party Talks (all countries except North Korea were represented on the Asan Plenum panel) have failed to move North Korea policy forward, least of all denuclearization. Christopher Hill, formerly the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and now at the University of Denver, argued that this was predominantly because the North Koreans were unwilling to commit to stepping back their nuclear program, no matter what the United States put on the table in exchange, citing the 2005 agreement as a comprehensive space in which the North Koreans were promised everything they asked for but still reneged on their side of the deal. But Maj. Gen. Pan Zhenqiang, a fellow at the China Reform Forum, argued that progress will only take place in an environment in which mutual

trust, understanding and respect is built between the North Koreans and the other members of the Six-Party Talks, particularly the United States and South Korea. Despite the lack of progress, the Six-Party Talks have been useful in maintaining stability, and in ensuring that the countries with most leverage vis-à-vis North Korea, and especially China, remain involved in the process.

The members of the Six-Party Talks are divided in their intentions vis-à-vis North Korea. Kim Tae-Woo from the Korea Institute for National Unification explained that South Korea's ultimate strategy would be for a continuous and steady process gradual reform in North Korea, reforms that would include rather than attempt to remove the North Korean leadership, with the ultimate goal being unification. China, explained Maj. Gen. Pan, remains committed to stability and to the principle of North Korea as a sovereign state that should have the capacity to defend itself. It remains the case that Tokyo's main concern is repatriation of the citizens that the North Korean regime has kidnapped over the years. And whilst Russia would very much like to see North Korea denuclearize, it has neither the acute sense of threat, nor the promise of any compelling economic opportunities (North Korea does not have gas or oil) to take on more of a role in the process than it already has. Hill suggested that while the U.S. it is at an impasse on denuclearization talks, and even though gradual regime change might be the most promising way forward, there are no concrete ideas about how to make that happen.

Whilst most parties expect that the situation in North Korea will remain stable as it goes through the mourning period for the recently deceased Kim Jong-Il, there are a few unknowns that may change calculations. Moscow's perception of the threat posed by North Korea is on the up as it plans to host the APEC summit in Vladivostok, a city too close to North Korea for comfort. South Korea will hold presidential elections later this year which, according to Kim Tae-Woo, means that there is a chance that Seoul's policy on North Korea may shift decisively North Korea may conduct another nuclear test, although Maj. Gen. Pan dismissed this as unlikely on the basis that Pyongyang knows that this would ultimately only serve to unite the international community against the regime.

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