

EXCLUSIVE: Long-Term North Korea Strategy is Missing

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The U.S and South Korea are not currently implementing policies that will garner positive results with North Korea, nor do they have an over-arching strategy for dealing with the isolated nation, agreed three American experts at a policy [forum](#) event in Washington D.C Wednesday. Assessing the current situation from various perspectives, the panelists all implied that a more proactive, cohesive and long-term approach to engagement with Pyongyang would yield better outcomes – for all involved.



Steven Linton, Founder of The Eugene Bell Foundation, a humanitarian organization providing development assistance to North Korea, started his analysis by suggesting that for a very long time North Korea has been looking for a positive and client-type relationship with the United States. Asking rhetorically how Washington managed to “blow it”, he answered by suggesting that American “ideological constructs” may be partly to blame. Ideological constructs that suggested ‘carrots’ would make North Korea change as a result of being “overwhelmed [with U.S] sincerity and good intentions”, or inversely, that ‘sticks’ would compel better behavior through the use of sanctions and threats. He put it to the audience that both of these ideological constructs have “now come face to face with reality and been shattered”.

He remarked that, “North Korea is neither going to be guiled into doing something that it thinks is against its national interest, nor is it going to be threatened. The sooner we get away from that kind of simplistic approach the better. And I think one of the ways we can start to build a more realistic framework for understanding North Korea is to at least go back and look at modern Korean history.”



In this regard Linton suggested that while for decades the DPRK had been obsessed with exporting its Juche ideology to the world, as the country became poorer in the 1980s it instead became “focused primarily on building real political and diplomatic relationships to allow it to survive”. Responding to this situation he asked, “What have we offered North Korea? Are we offering them national survival or are we offering them another extreme makeover according to an ideology that will essentially negate most of what they consider their primary gains in the last fifty years?”

With the context set, Linton suggested that current policy “does not compute as national survival” for North Korea.

In moving forward from the current impasse he pointed out that it was imperative that countries such as the U.S and the ROK also stop responding to North Korea in a ‘North Korean’ manner. He pointed out that South Korea, despite having a pluralistic society, huge civilian sector resources, and an enormous private sector pool of wealth, nevertheless tries to funnel all possible engagement through the Government – in just the same way that North Korea conducts all of its relations with Seoul. He conjectured that while private sector is the strongest part of a free society, U.S sanctions currently prevent American enterprise from making a difference, pointing out that “When a free society tries to funnel everything through government initiatives and ministries, you have a weakening rather than a strengthening of the process.”

A proactive approach would instead advocate a more hands-off approach allowing private organizations and enterprises engage North Korea on an individual basis, without the conditions and constructions currently being imposed by the current administrations in Seoul and Washington D.C. Presenting a video of some of the Eugene Bell Foundations’ success in North Korea, he finished his analysis by illustrating some of the positive impact such activities could have.

Karen Lee, Executive Director of the National Committee on North Korea, suggested that lessons learned regarding the sanctions applied to Iraq had seemingly gone over the head of South Korea. Remembering the widespread hurt to Iraq’s civilian population caused by the blunt approach applied after the Gulf War, she noted that the international

community by consensus currently advocates sanctions that cause the minimal damage to civilian life. Consequently, South Korea's decision to now prevent the bulk of NGOs from either delivering aid or conducting monitoring visits illustrates just how far the country is out of touch with today's international sentiment. She added that Iraq "was a lesson that was learned the hard way, and I would expect that the South Korean government would come back inside within international consensus and lift that ban on



NGO activities as quickly as possible.”

Labeling the various sanctions applied to North Korea as ‘tactics’, Lee rhetorically asked the administrations of South Korea and the U.S, “Where is the strategy? We know what your first and second step is, but what is the third step?” Citing the measures taken in response to the sinking of the Cheonan case as evidence of this over-reliance on tactics, she pointed to the lack of an exit strategy as symptomatic of the overall lack of an overarching North Korea strategy in both Seoul and Washington.

Dwelling on the issue, Lee proposed that for sanctions to work effectively States must be united in their application and all must be in a position to have something to sacrifice. For its part and as a result of Washington's decades long policy of economic isolation, she suggested that it correspondingly had very little to lose when pushing for sanctions. Correspondingly, Beijing, having significant economic trade with the DPRK, would have a lot more to lose if it were to vigorously impose robust sanctions – an important point to remember when accusing China of not currently doing enough, she added. But from Seoul's perspective,

“A very interesting new development is that South Korea is now making an economic sacrifice in response to the Cheonan. It will be interesting to see if South Korea is able to sustain this economic sacrifice...A recent Chosun Ilbo report says that business people engaged in North Korean projects say they will be ruined if trade does not resume. So lets say that South Korea listens to its people and that trade is restarted again. How can the US continue to criticize China if it chooses not to engage in sanctions against the

DPRK...if it doesn't also choose to criticize South Korea, if in fact it makes this decision.”

Lee went on to show how little influence the US currently has with North Korea by citing the fact that the Obama administration recently linked visas for Track Two dialogue to success on the nuclear issue, a decision that actually took place before the Cheonan incident. She remarked, “I don't think visa denial is an expression of strength, I actually think its an expression of weakness. I would like to see our government develop a transparent visa policy that encourages dialogue, not discourages it.”

Having illustrated the context behind each countries approach to sanctions, Lee rounded off her talk by pondering over possible situations they could ever be rolled back, especially with regards to partial compliance – a point that underscored her argument that they should only ever be part of a much larger North Korea strategy.

Doug Bandow, a Senior Fellow at Cato Institute rounded off the talk by recommending a new policy of engagement for Washington to pursue.



Noting that Pyongyang is currently proceeding on both its nuclear and missile programs with a sanctions regime already in place, he suggested it was clear that current policy was not delivering any real results. He argued that the concept of ignoring North Korea in the hope that the problem would go away was also imprudent, as illustrated by the fact that Pyongyang often acts belligerently when left alone for too long. As a result, Bandow suggested that the lack of over-arching policy that the other speakers had alluded to in their presentations illustrated the need for a “refashioned form of engagement” with the U.S involving China involved in a “more positive way”.

While admitting that “I think there is no option that we know will work”, Bandow added, “Nevertheless, we have to look at some options and make some changes compared to where we're at. One of which strikes me is that we have to have diplomatic relations

with North Korea. Whatever the rest of the issues, I see little to gain from refusing to recognize North Korea". He remarked that such recognition would provide some sense to Pyongyang of respect from the U.S, while giving Washington some strongly needed inside information on a very closed society.

He added that to get into North Korean society, the more people that could go there from the West and have relationships, the better. However, he did admit that it was difficult to gauge the overall impact of such liaison. Consequently he also advocated a separation of Private and Governmental aid as a means of facilitating the work of organizations such as the Eugene Bell Foundation in future times of tension.

As part of this approach Bandow stated that it would be essential to simultaneously convince China that it is in their interest to be more proactive with North Korea. He consequently recommended a new approach that would illustrate both how and why China should think differently. Firstly, by making Beijing realize that the current situation was not necessarily as stable as it might think- through pointing to the sometimes strong pressure within the U.S to take military action against the DPRK following acts of belligerency. Secondly, that China should not assume that future WMD proliferation by North Korea will be met with the same restraint that has been characteristic of responses so far. Thirdly, that the U.S will not be interested in remaining in the middle of the situation forever and might one day allow the ROK or Japan to move ahead on their own nuclear programs.

He also suggested that China should be made clear that the U.S would not try and take unilateral advantage in the event things worked out badly, and that countries such as Japan and the ROK should be willing to share the costs of any future refugee problems. Longer-term he stated that "If China was helpful in resolving the situation...the U.S would be quite prepared to say America's military role is over on the Korean peninsula", noting it is approaching the time when Washington should step back.

In this regard he noted that without the 29,000 U.S troops stationed in South Korea, the U.S would actually not have much interest in the issue, nor would it be within easy reach of North Korean retaliation. Without this presence he thus asserted that other countries in the region would face an increased onus to step up and deal with the issue, allowing the U.S to take a more supportive role in future.

The event took place at the CATO Institute in Washington D.C on Wednesday July 14 2010. It was moderated by Galen Carpenter, Vice President for Defense and Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute.