

**Speech delivered by
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**“Nuclear Weapons, Succession Politics and the Future of North
Korea”**

First of all let me express my thanks and gratitude to the Jeju Peace Institute for inviting me to this important event. It is a great honour to participate in this panel about the DPRK and to speak to such a distinguished audience.

Due to limited time I have to be very brief. My remarks will be more or less based on my experience from more than ten visits to Pyongyang in the last two years.

Generally speaking, I think that our judgement is too much driven by the media, which always raises the same questions and keeps on speculating on the question of succession. What I am missing in the discussion is an analysis about our own strengths, weaknesses and opportunities.

I will try not to stick to reports in newspapers, because to me they very often are wishful thinking. Let me give you one example of how ridiculous they are from time to time. When Kim Jong-Il wears sneakers, he must be very sick. When you and I wear sneakers, we enjoy

life and go hiking in the mountains. Why am I saying this? Because when we raise the wrong questions we get the wrong answers.

So what are the real challenges? Let me try to put myself in the shoes of the so called relevant forces in North Korea and let us have a closer look at what their intentions and their perceptions of the world are. What is the reason for the tests? What is the reason for leaving the Six Party Talks?

North Korea threatens the entire world. A Taepodong 2 missile can reach up to 6500 kilometres and poses a threat even for Europe. To me there is no single explanation of why North Korea threatens the international community in this way. To understand their behaviour we need to develop a comprehensive picture of the external and internal factors that motivate them. It is only by understanding the North Korean view of the world that we can develop a strategy to deal with the situation.

Let me stress a few points. I am sure we could add more.

1. North Korea wants to improve its bargaining power

The discussion on the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula seems to be a never ending story. From the period between 1994 and today we can nevertheless reason by analogy. There were times of progress and times of when the situation froze or moved backwards. We had similar experiences in Europe. Trial and error is always part of such complicated issues.

What lessons can we learn from 15 years of negotiations? What was the attitude of North Korea? Why did they come and go?

Following the 1994 Framework Agreement the United States negotiated bilaterally with the DPRK and experimented with the Four Party Talks without success. I am not going into detail, which party was responsible for the failure, because that would be a matter of political interpretation. At the same time North-South relations were also at a stalemate. It was not until 1999, one year into the Kim Dae-jung Administration and as the Clinton Administration speeded up its North Korea policy following the conclusions of the Perry Report that the North announced a self imposed moratorium on missile testing. In response the US-Administration eased some trade and travel sanctions.

In August 2003 the DPRK agreed to participate in the Six Party Talks after it had withdrawn from the Non-Proliferation Treaty earlier in the year. After the first nuclear test in October 2006 the talks were interrupted and resumed on February 13th, 2007. Often a start-and-stop process the talks collapsed this year after the Security Council issued a Presidential Statement condemning the DPRK's launch of a missile. Then came the second nuclear test on May 25th, 2009.

So far, the facts about the negotiations

Asians are well known for their negotiation skills. The word compromise has somehow a negative connotation. Compromising is very often perceived as weakness. For North Koreans it would have been a sign of weakness to release the two American journalists immediately. They have made it a political principle only to negotiate from

a strong position. They always take a tough stance when the other party shows weakness.

Moreover, in any concessions made by North Korea, the possible effect on domestic stability always has top priority.

When the US freed Iraq from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein in 2003 North Korea realised that the US would not want to become embroiled in another major conflict or confrontation. They knew that the US-Administration would have to compromise with them and that they had the upper hand.

When President Bush announced his resolve to solve the nuclear issue in North Korea before the end of his term, Pyongyang knew that it would be able to extract concessions from the US. Washington announced that in the context of resolving “pending bilateral issues” and “moving toward full diplomatic relations,” it would begin the process of removing the DPRK from the List of State Sponsors of Terrorism. Before resuming the talks North Korea also insisted on receiving assistance to solve its energy problem. The DPRK declared that it would not return to nuclear negotiations until the Banco Delta Asia matter was resolved. Finally the US had to give in, because they found themselves in a weak position after Bush had made his ambitious goal public. North Korea itself disclosed how important it was for the regime to have access to foreign currency. This has become even more essential after China became a member of the World Trade Organisation and dual pricing practices have not been allowed anymore. North Korea has been paying world market prices for every import, i.e. fuel, from China since then. The conditions for only a few trade-offs are known (for example rice for coal).

2. North Korea wants bilateral negotiations with the United States of America and wants to attract increased attention from the new US-Administration

We know that the DPRK never favoured the Six Party Talks. Their objective was and still is to have bilateral relations not only with the United States but with all the other parties as well. A, to a certain extent, coordinated approach of the five negotiation partners is weakening North Korea's position. The closer the five are, the fewer options North Korea has. The strategic goal of Pyongyang is therefore to keep all of its options open as long as possible and to participate in these talks as long as they can get something out of them. When they call for bilateral talks we should always be aware that their foremost intention is to enforce a policy of “divide et impera”. There are several events which could confirm this thesis. Just recently we have witnessed North Korea quitting the Six Party Talks because they were in a position that they had to deliver more than just the symbolic blast of the cooling tower in Yongbyon. Everybody knew that the settlement of the question of verification would turn out to be the decisive moment of truth. In this point the September 2005 declaration was not firm enough and left North Korea with too much that was open to interpretation.

But the testing of missiles and walking away from the negotiation table does not provide the confidence building necessary to forge better diplomatic relations. It is rather the opposite. Imposing threats is not serving North Korea's own political objectives. The relevant forces in the DPRK for sure are aware of the fact that their actions are backfiring in this respect because it creates a common response from China, Russia, South Korea, Japan and the United States.

From the perspective of moderate North Koreans, Juche is more than just an economic principle. It also plays an important role in foreign policy. It has always stood as the opposite to “Sa-dae joo-eui”, the principle of paying respect to big countries. It dictates North Korea’s attitude towards the world by providing a man-centred outlook. Unlike Marxism, which gives explanatory importance to material production and socio-economic relations, Juche emphasizes the primacy of man – it is man alone who has the capacity to transform both nature and society – the material and the ideal. North Korea’s “Weltanschauung”, (meaning perception of the world) according to the dictates of Juche, is thus to maintain the “independence” of the state and thus of the people. This probably is one of the reasons of the cooling down in the Chinese North Korean relationship, which by the way is no more a relationship of "Lips and teeth". Obviously China has lost some influence on the DPRK, although it is by far its biggest trading partner and they have annually been shipping more or less the same amount of rice and fuel to North Korea for the last five years. Of course North Korea fears that the United States and China might come to an agreement over its head signalling the demise of the swing policy it has practised up until now.

3. North Korea wants to influence public opinion in South Korea

I still remember one incident in Pyongyang in October 2007. In the lobby of Koryo Hotel I accidentally met one official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK. I knew him from my previous trips. In a brief conversation he all of a sudden asked me what I, as a foreigner, would say about the outcome of the upcoming presidential elections in South Korea. I predicted that from my point of view Lee Myong-Bak would be elected by a landslide. He immediately got out of control and rapidly screamed that I was too much influenced by the conservative media in South Korea. Why am I telling you this episode?

Firstly, he simply did not want to hear the reality. Officially Pyongyang had decided to go for the Uri Party and they were to their best knowledge convinced that they could with their means avoid a government which they knew would be a tougher negotiation partner. To express scepticism about strategic political decisions is unthinkable. Too much was at stake for North Korea after Kim Jong-Il and Roh Moo-Hyun had signed the agreement of October 4th. According to the Hyundai Economic Research Institute North Korea would have benefited by more than 10 Billion Dollars from South Korean taxpayers.

Secondly, they want to leave no stone unturned to influence the public in South Korea.

They are deeply convinced that the neglect, which from their perception was successful during the presidency of the hardliner Kim Young-Sam in the 1990s, would work again. The missile launches, especially the short range missiles, are destined to intimidate the population in South Korea. After the suicide of former President Roh Moo-Hyun they expected that people would rally again against the government as they did last year at the candle light vigils, and this could, with their support, become the launch pad for a new social movement. Arguments that people usually bolster their government in times of uncertainty, also in times of economic crisis are simply not accepted because it either does not fit to their interests or they don’t want to admit their inability to assess the political situation in other countries. Indeed, due to the authoritarian leadership in North Korea even officials who have lived abroad for quite

a while still have difficulties to understand basic rules of pluralistic democratic processes.

4. North Korea wants to influence the upcoming elections in Japan

The same applies accordingly to Japan where elections take place on August 30th. After the outcome of the local elections in Tokyo, where the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) defeated the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), North Korea anticipates that this could also happen nationwide. After the September 2002 agreement, the relationship between the two countries became chilly because the conservative Japanese government was more focussing on the abduction issue for domestic reasons. There has been little official contact between the two countries in the last years. Japan is the country with the most sanctions on North Korea. But here again, due to the same phenomena I just described, it will from my point of view be proven as a misinterpretation to believe that the DPJ will be an easier negotiation partner. The DPJ is a Democratic Party which has to respect the voters' will. The DPRK should not make any mistake. The DPJ is not less committed to the resolution of the problem of abductees and feels "seriously threatened by North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles". Even a new government under the leadership of the DPJ sees for now the necessity to maintain its economic sanctions against North Korea.

5. North Korea wants to secure the transfer of political power

From my point of view it lacks any logic to conclude from Kim Jong-II's health condition that the stability of the regime is under threat.

First of all, I don't see anybody who is going to question the leading role of the Korean Workers Party. Despite the military first policy, the military is and will always remain the military of the party. In this sense the army remains the protector of the regime, the custodian of the people and the guardian for North Korea all in all, as long as the interest of the country's leadership is identical to the interest of the nation.

Secondly, the political system in the DPRK is a person centred system. Kim Jong-II has never allowed himself to be challenged by anybody. Any nail that sticks out is always hammered down. North Korean society is very much conformist and it is better not to be too ambitious. The best policy is to either keep your head down or to always show your support for the superior. Hierarchy and respect is one of the most important virtues in the Korean traditions that stem from Confucianism.

Some experts have assumed that the National Defence Commission could take over as some form of collective leadership if Kim Jong-il were to pass away before the issue of succession had been settled. I do not see this as the case. As there are reports that the third son Kim Jong-un has already been inserted into the political system, I believe that the role of the NDC will simply be to facilitate the transition. It will not take on a form of collective power itself.

It is no coincidence that Kim Jong-II decided to appoint people to the NDC who loyally served him during the change of guard in 1994. These people have no interest in changing the political or institutional framework. They are deeply convinced of the supremacy of socialism.

Kim Jong-Il obviously does not want to run any risks. But this could sooner or later turn out to be a big mistake. His probable successor, the political apprentice Kim Jong-Un, newly elected member of the Supreme Peoples Assembly (SPA) has to build up a following amongst the new generation. Some of them might already feel betrayed by knowing that they will have to serve a commander in chief who is in his twenties (by the way, Kim Jong-Un was elected in constituency Nr. 216, a symbolic number in North Korea).

With the missile tests the chargé d'affaires in North Korea sent out the unequivocal signal to the military that "Songun" policy (military first policy) will continue to play a pivotal role in the succession as it did in 1994/1995 when the Sogun policy was introduced as "revolutionary idea of attaching great importance to the military". Since then the army has become synonymous with the people, the state and the party.

At the moment the biggest danger for the leader of the country is that he might run out of time before completing the transition. Most members of the NDC are in their mid-seventies. The youngest is Jang Song-Taek, 64 years old. It is known that he has contacts with physicians overseas. The more important issue is to ensure that there is no struggle between rivals and that power is vested in the hands of one man. I am not saying that a collective leadership is impossible, but other approaches seem more likely and more plausible when one considers the system, the tradition and the history.

So, who will have the final say in the process? Nobody knows if Kim Jong-Il is still capable of ruling the country. If he is not, everything points to his brother in law, Jang Song-Taek. Before he was "sent on vacation" in April 2004 for some time, he was the Director of the powerful Department for Planning and Organisation in the Central Committee of the People's Workers Party. He knows about the importance of personality cult for the political stability of the country, without which the system would simply not work and he knows that mass mobilisation and propaganda is a key element for a socialist society. Thus in all probability, he, strongly backed by the two Generals O Kuk-Ryol and Kim Yong-Choon, was the mastermind and initiator of the 150 day fight "let's storm race and take off on the dragon horse" (Baek O Ship Il Jeon-Too). This campaign also proves that at the moment we can witness a revival of Juche, which in an orthodox interpretation by some elder military is seen as being essential for the survival of the regime.

Of course the Leader is fully aware that everything needs to be done for a smooth transfer of power. He fully understands that the system is vulnerable in these times. There are many examples for badly handled handovers in the world and also in Korean history.

For example the third king of Chosun, Taejong greatly contributed to the foundation of his fatherland, helping his father build the country. Though his contribution, he was not nominated as Crown Prince. However, his political opponent Cheong Do-Jeon, was in favour of collective governance by ministers and thus feared that Taejong would eliminate him and his followers if he took power. Thus, instead of Taejong his step-brother was nominated as Crown Prince. In 1398, Taejong took the opportunity of his father's sickness to kill his two step-brothers and seized control of all military power. Nonetheless, instead of making himself king, he gave the throne to his elder brother who became 2nd king of Chosun.

One more example is Crown Prince Sado Seja. He was killed in 1762 in the middle of a power struggle between So-ron and No-ron/Pyeok-pa. In the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910) out of respectively 27 kings and Crown Princes 12 Crown Princes died without becoming king.

6. North Korea pretends to be threatened by the United States of America

According to polls in South Korea there is less and less of a perception that North Korea poses a threat. On the other hand, due to the fact that North Korean's leadership has been systematically fuelling fear amongst its population since the Korean War, the fear of war in the North has almost become pathological. The United States of America with its "Strategy of Extended Deterrence" in North East Asia is seen as a military hegemon in the world. Like China, North Korea wants to contribute to a multi-polar response. North Korea does not believe in the September 2005 Declaration that there are no nuclear weapons on South Korean territory.

Its military equipment, which dates back to the former Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, is in poor condition. Spare parts are not available anymore. The armed forces are therefore operational to only a limited extent. The remedy is seen in the nuclear program and the development of a long range missile, to which the leadership dedicates substantial resources. Since this missile is useable as a vehicle for a satellite or a nuclear bomb it is most likely that the DPRK wants to build up a credible fully operational nuclear deterrent. In so far the officials know that they are ahead of the Iranian nuclear program and show big disappointment that the US does not acknowledge this fact.

7. The North Korean military wants to sell its weapons and natural resources abroad and generate foreign currency

Few facts are known about the so called "second economy" of the military. The General Manager for the military industry, Chun Byeong Ho (84), is member of the NDC. While in 2007 the sectors which were up for modernization were agriculture, IT, the banking system and light industry this switched sometime in the first half of 2008 to key industries like heavy industry, energy and export of natural resources which are mostly run by the military. Their economic foundation has been significantly strengthened in 2008. Besides the export of natural resources to China the military does business with Iran, Syria, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Sudan and Angola. It was only in the New Years Editorial of Rodong Shinmun 2009, the mouthpiece of the Worker's Party, that it finally became obvious to everybody that the military had taken the lead.

Having said this let me conclude.

1. What we need is a rational and comprehensive approach which reflects the experience of the last 15 years.
2. There is no alternative to a preventive, unconditional and constructive dialogue in the framework of the Six Party Talks to resolve the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula. All countries involved in the Six Party Talks should pursue pro-active diplomacy in order to build up confidence.

3. China with its regional influence plays a significant role in the process of denuclearisation.
4. The five parties need bargaining power.
5. More and more countries want to have access to enriched uranium for purely peaceful purposes. The review of the NPT-Treaty in 2010 should set up a mechanism under which conditions for this might be allowed.
6. There are many motives behind the action of North Korea which have to be taken into consideration to formulate a successful strategy for denuclearisation.
7. If North Korea wants to become a prosperous country they should return at an early stage to the Treaty of Non Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons IAEA safeguards and the Six Party Talks.