



DATE: September 28, 2017

SUBJECT: A Round Table Discussion with the Venerable Pomnyun Sunim | The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation

MAIN POINTS:

- It is a huge miscalculation to think that China can solve the North Korean problem.
- North Korea is used to being economically isolated, and its economy has been improving, so more economic sanctions will cause suffering, but will not kill the regime.
- The United States should acknowledge that North Korea is a nuclear weapons-capable state.
- The United States and South Korea should stop talking about preemptive strike on North Korea and engage in face-to-face dialogue with Pyongyang.
- The United States and North Korea must resolve the security crisis before they can initiate the dialogue, and South Korea's role should be to move the two countries toward dialogue.
- In the current chicken game between the United States and North Korea, the United States is the stronger side and therefore should give up more to solve the problem in a peaceful way.

EVENT OVERVIEW

Date: Monday, September 25, 2017

Time: 10:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Location: The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, 1156 15th Street, NW Suite 1105,

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Attendees:

- **The Venerable Pomnyun Sunim**, Founder and Guiding Zen Master, Jungto Society | Founder, Good Friends for Peace, Human Rights, and Refugee Issues

SUMMARY

Frank Januzzi, the CEO of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, introduced the Venerable Pomnyun Sunim. He asked Pomnyun Sunim to speak about strategic situations in North Korea, the perspectives of Seoul (how people in South Korea see North Korean issues), and how to find peace in the international society.

The Venerable Pomnyun Sunim introduced himself as working for the Peace Foundation. He visited Washington D.C. with two purposes. The one is to speak about how to deal with peace issues on the Korean peninsula, and the other is to give inner peace to people. He said that he planned to give a lecture to overseas Koreans living in Virginia and Maryland, and to students at American University.

Pomnyun Sunim said that North Korea (NK) and the United States (US) demonstrate their military powers nowadays and these military actions make everybody concerned. Even in the United Nations, which was established for world peace, they declare to destroy each other. In his view, it is not only a bilateral issue but also every country's issue. He argued that other countries in the UN should stand up to protest against hostile actions between the US and NK.

The reason why the tension between the US and NK escalates is because both consider their self-pride a very important factor, according to Pomnyun Sunim. The United States strongly insists it cannot admit North Korea having nuclear weapons, and North Korea argues it cannot give up their nuclear missiles. Pomnyun Sunim said that they are both irrational and emotional.

He mentioned his conclusion first; in this case of chicken game, he thought that it is better for the strong party to give way to the weaker party because the strong has more options than the weak. He argued that US should make a concession not because it is the US, but because it is the stronger one. He stated that it would lead to peaceful solution of this tension.

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Pomnyun Sunim argued there are multiple ways to solve the NK nuclear crisis peacefully. However, he said that it is difficult to solve it because of political reasons. The United States and North Korea both have their own domestic issues. To gain domestic support, it is difficult for both the US and NK to back down.

Pomnyun Sunim stated that in order to find out the way to relieve the tension and gain real strategic interests, it is important to understand why we are engaged in this fight, for what end. In his point of view, the strategic interests of US in East Asia for the long term are to win over China. He explained that there are three regional issues between US and China. The one is Southeast Asia Sea, another is Senkaku Islands, and the other is Korean peninsula. The first two regions are where US' and Chinese interests have direct conflicts. The Korean peninsula is the place where they have indirect conflicts. That was why he thought it is more possible that military conflicts would occur on the Korean peninsula.

He had doubts about the United States urging China to solve North Korean nuclear problems and whether it would be helpful for US' real interests. He said that North Korea is not listening to not only the United States but also China. In his opinion, China thinks South Korea is the weakest link among the United States, Japan, and South Korea trilateral alliances. So it puts lots of pressure on South Korea including THAAD retaliation to make South Korea renounce the alliance. He argued that because China has strong strategic interests even on South Korea, it is impossible for China to give up its strategic interests on North Korea. He said that although China doesn't want current North Korea because NK is now a headache for China, it still wants to sustain NK regime as a buffer zone. China now cooperates with the United States and South Korea because it wants to control North Korea which doesn't want to be under the Chinese security umbrella. North Korea pursues self-reliance with its *juche* ideology. However, the cooperation between China and the US will not last long because China ultimately wants to sustain the NK regime.

He also argued that even if sanctions succeed and stop North Korea to develop nuclear missiles, all the benefits would go to China. If North Korea has difficulties because of sanctions, it would rely on China and be under the Chinese nuclear umbrella. He explained a possible scenario after North Korea being under the Chinese security umbrella. He stated that in this case, there would be no need for South Korea to get any military help from the United States. He expected that economic ties between South Korea and the United States would also be weakened because of FTA issues. Based on these reasons, he argued that South Korea would pursue unification while

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cooperating with China. He argued that there is high probability of this happening when imagining 30 years later. However, if China fails to have North Korea under its security umbrella, the conflict between North Korea and the United States will continue. That is why he insisted that US should reexamine its policy towards NK. He strongly argued that the US should talk with NK.

Pomnyun Sunim said that it is impossible for North Korea to completely abandon its nuclear programs because of its security concerns and domestic political reasons. He said that what we can choose now is to convince them to stop. Although it was possible in 2005 and now it became even more difficult, he believed that we could still freeze North Korean nuclear program. He argued that we could make North Korea stop nuclear experiments, stop increasing production of nuclear materials, and stop missile tests. However, he acknowledged it is hard to bring this idea up to an open table because whoever brings it up will have difficult situations.

He continued to insist that pressuring North Korea would face failure. He said it would cause nuclear development of North Korea to be even faster, and it would lead to nuclear proliferation. In conclusion, he thought Trump's pressure tactic should be changed to negotiation and dialogue policy with North Korea.

He stated that no one could be fully satisfied through negotiations, but there would be long-term strategic benefits. He argued that once agreements are made, it would be kept. He said that trilateral agreement by the United States, South Korea, and North Korea is especially needed. It could lead to North Korean economic development. In his point of view, as North Korea has cheap labor force we could stop relying on Chinese labor and utilize North Korean labor.

He also argued that there is no need to worry about cost for unification. Through close economic cooperation, it could be easily solved. He also mentioned strategic benefits of cooperating with NK, and one example was to set up a naval foothold in Chongjin and Rason in NK. In his opinion, if the peaceful relationship between North Korea and South Korea is achieved, the front line would be naturally moved to the Amnokgang (Yalu River) and the Tumen River. He also argued that in this case, North Korea would give up nuclear weapons.

Pomnyun Sunim kept emphasizing that the military option by US would cause too much sacrifice. It would be miscalculation if the US considers NK as similar cases with Iraq or Syria. At the background of North Korea, there is China so that it is hard to send ground forces to North Korea. In addition to that, if North Korean regime collapses, pro-Chinese government would take

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place of it. He raised a question why we should pursue a policy which is dangerous and doesn't have practical benefit. And he added that he emotionally agreed with it but underlined that it is irrational. He argued that we should think of not only peace but also strategic interests.

The United States denounced South Korea free-riding on US security and defense efforts. However, it is not true, said Pomnyun Sunim. He stated that South Korea has received help from the United States, but South Korea also plays an important role for projecting US interest. He also argued there should be no war on the Korean peninsula not only for South Korea but also for interests of the United States.

Another point he also stressed was that it is not appropriate to outsource solutions to China. He said that economic sanction is inevitable, but it is miscalculation to think that it would succeed. It can make them suffer but it cannot kill them. In North Korean economy, trade is of little importance. China consists of the most part of North Korean trade but it doesn't mean that China could therefore control North Korea, he said. In addition to that, surprisingly, he observed that North Korean economy has been improving for past 4-5 years. The market is in some degree settled, and food supply is stabilized even though food is still scarce. The daily necessities are now being replaced by North Korean products.

As a conclusion, Pomnyun Sunim emphasized the importance of negotiation and dialogue with North Korea.

Q&A

Q (Frank Jannuzi, the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation): You mentioned that North Korean motivation for nuclear weapons is from its insecurity and domestic political reasons. I wonder there might be one other possible motivation. People are now more concerned about the coercive, offensive stance by NK. North Korea might use nuclear weapons to threaten the United States, South Korea, and Japan in order to coerce South Korea to abandon its alliance and to reunify under the direction of NK. Does North Korea have this ambition?

A (Pomnyun Sunim): North Korea strongly argues it will use nuclear weapons to the United States and its allies. However, the United States, South Korea, and Japan would not submit to the threat. Then why NK says like this? I think it's North Korean domestic

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propaganda. North Korean economy is weaker and more unstable than South Korean economy so that many people surmise that unification would be led by South Korea. It weakens North Koreans' loyalty to the regime. Therefore, NK makes efforts to increase the possibility of North Korean centrality in case of unification.

The main policy of the United States and South Korea towards North Korea is preemptive strike. However, the preparation for preemptive strike should be stopped as it doesn't have realistic benefits. Especially, US should argue that it doesn't have any intention to attack the regime. Moon Jae-in administration has underscored this argument but it is not enough because NK thinks that US takes the initiative. In short, another reason why North Korea keeps offensive stance is that the United States insists preemptive strike.

Q (Dan Aum, the National Bureau of Asian Research): Does Trump truly have intention to attack North Korea? Or does he take an offensive stance because of domestic political reasons?

A (Pomnyun Sunim): It seems that Trump also takes an aggressive stance because of domestic political reasons. There is a solution about NK nuclear crisis, but it is hard to address it because it's rarely digested by domestic political issues. I don't know whether it's appropriate or not, but here is an analogy. There are two gangsters. One of them brings out his knife and threatens the other to kill, but he doesn't really mean it. Then the other should step back. However, if the other shows bigger power and provokes to stab him then there will be no way other than stabbing. It makes matters worse. They are stuck in the situation and tensions are escalating.

Q (Hayley Aron, the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation): How to make North Korea come to the negotiation table?

A (Pomnyun Sunim): It is difficult to make North Korea come to the negotiation table by threatening. North Korea doesn't have intention to surrender so we have to give them good excuses. And it is important not to impose pre-conditions. If there are pre-conditions, North Korea would not come to the negotiation table. Negotiation and dialogue are necessary and I think it is probable that North Korea would agree on having negotiation.

Q (So-yeon Kim, RFK): Do you think the effort of South Korean government to change the stance of the United States is sufficient? Do you think South Korean government should argue that we should make North Korea stop nuclear experiments, not denuclearization?

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A (Pomnyun Sunim): North Korea always thinks that they have a fight against the United States. Their main enemy is US. Therefore, they think security issues should be resolved with the United States, not with South Korea. However, South Korea doesn't fully understand this North Korean perspective. Therefore, South Korea should play a leading role to create an atmosphere for negotiation between NK and US. For example, South Korea can make economic investment in North Korea. As the benefits from peace and unification are for South Korea, so it is better for South Korea to invest in North Korea. Only after the negotiation between North Korea and the United States proceeds, the negotiation between North Korea and South Korea could take place.

Report by: Lee Jihye, Research Intern