**COOPERATING FOR PEACE IN KOREA AND NORTH EAST ASIA**

Presentation by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans to Yonsei Institute for North Korean Studies and ROK Ministry of National Unification International Conference on *Peace and Unification of the Korean Peninsula: Comprehensive Approaches,* Panel on ‘International Environment for Peace of North East Asia and Unification of Korea’, Seoul, 14 November 2016

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The security environment in North East Asia has for some time been far from comfortable, with China and the United States each unwilling to yield leadership of the region to the other; China, Japan and Korea still fighting history wars; and North Korea ever closer to a fully missile-deliverable nuclear weapons stockpile.

It has now become a whole lot less comfortable now with the election last week of Donald Trump as US President. US soft power has taken a battering and there is deep uncertainty and anxiety about how its hard power will now be exercised. The only grounds for confidence are that he may actually do none of the things he said he would, such as starting a trade war with China, walking away from alliance commitments, and supporting Japan and South Korea going nuclear.

If peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula is ever to be a remotely realistic possibility. there seem to be, apart from serious internal political commitment in both South and North, three main conditions which need to be satisfied: first, China and the US achieving a stable, cooperative and non-confrontational relationship; second, North Korea starting to behave in a less hysterically confrontational fashion, and more like a normal country; and third, other countries in the region – notably South Korea and Japan, but also Russia – doing nothing to destabilize the situation.

Each of these three specific conditions really depends on a fourth, common, underlying condition being satisfied: namely, all the major players in the region adopting a ‘cooperative security’ *mindset,* finding security and prosperity *with*, rather than against, others. It is a mindset which recognizes that other states have aspirations, fears and anxieties just as we do, and that cooperative rather than confrontational strategies are the best ways of building mutual confidence.

My hope has long been that this kinds of mindset could best be created over time by the evolution of regional security and economic architecture – APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum and all the rest, culminating now in the East Asian Summit. But I have to acknowledge that none of these new regional institutions – although the EAS in particular is still potentially very important – have so far made much impact. We have a long way to go in getting all the major countries to instinctively think cooperatively, rather than suspiciously and negatively, about each other. But the task is not impossible, and there are plenty of ways in which at least a start can be made in meeting the three conditions I have mentioned.

1. *China and the US achieving a stable, cooperative and non-confrontational relationship*

This matters for Korean unification because of the anxiety China has long held about having a country with any kind of alliance relationship with the US hard up against its own border. This fear seemed to have significantly diminished in recent years as China developed a much more comfortable relationship with South Korea, but as that relationship has cooled again, with tensions rising particularly with the deployment of the THAAD missile defence system, which Beijing for better or worse sees as undermining its strategic retaliatory capability, it has again bubbled to the surface, and will only go away if China ceases to see the US as any kind of threat.

If relations between the US and China are to fundamentally improve, both powers are going to have to moderate some of their present language, and behaviour.

For *China,* this means more consistent language like that of President Xi Jinping to the Australian Parliament in 2014, when he acknowledged that China was seen as the ‘big guy in the crowd’ and that others ‘may be concerned that the big guy may push them around, stand in their way or even take up their place’, but insisted that it wanted only a stable domestic and peaceful international environment, that it was committed to peacefully addressing territorial and other disputes through dialogue and consultation,  and that it wanted win-win progress with all its neighbours. And it means behaviour to match this language, not least in relation to territorial claims in its own neighbouring waters, showing genuine commitment to a rules-based international order.

For the *United States,* the critical starting point is to psychologically adjust itself to the reality that it is no longer the world’s sole superpower, and recognise that it really does need to give some strategic space, and shared rule-making and rule-enforcing power, to China through mutually accommodating cooperation. It needs to stop routinely using, in public discourse, words like ‘leadership’, ‘primacy’, ‘pre-eminence’, and ‘predominance’.

The best expression I have ever heard of the mindset required, was a comment I heard former President Bill Clinton make at a private function in Los Angeles in 2002:  ‘*The U.S. has two choices about how we use the great and overwhelming military and economic power we now possess. We can try to use it to stay top dog on the global block in perpetuity. Or we can use it to try to create a world in which we will be comfortable living when we are no longer top dog on the global block*.’

The big question now of course is what approach President Trump will bring to this whole question, given that there are two competing instincts that he seems to bring to all these issues – one is the chest-beating, muscular ‘Make America Great Again’/ make the US a ‘winner’ again which we have heard over and again, combined with many threats to confront China at least economically; the other is the isolationist, ‘America First’ retreat-from-entanglements rhetoric, which suggests a lack of interest in taking any risks at all to assert continuing US primacy in the region. No-one knows which way Trump will jump on these issues, including no doubt Trump himself, because he has obviously never studied or thought through them.

There are plenty of constructive ways forward if Trump, and the advisers he picks, choose to exercise them. Some of the best ideas around for how to move the US-China relationship in a less potentially confrontational direction have come from the former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in his 2015 Harvard Kennedy School paper on *The Future of U.S.-China Relations Under Xi Jinping.*

The approach is to begin by recognizing that certain areas of disagreement are going to be intractable for the foreseeable future, with no easy solutions but requiring careful management: among them Taiwan, the South and East China Seas, the role of US alliances in Asia, Chinese military modernization and the legitimacy of its political system. But you add to that a serious attempt to come up with a menu of global, regional and bilateral issues which *can* be tackled collaboratively, and it is in everyone’s interest to do so. At the global level, climate change has obviously been one such issue, but US commitment to pursuing that under Trump is obviously a huge question mark. But at the bilateral and regional level some important things might be doable – including, conceivably, developing a joint China-US strategy for the ultimate reunification and for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,

1. *North Korea starting to behave in a less hysterically confrontational fashion, and more like a normal country*

I am one of those optimists who believes that this is not a completely impossible task. The North Koreans are deeply unpleasant, irresponsible, and their behaviour is sometimes unpredictably erratic. But they don’t bear all the blame for the past (including the breakdown of the original Agreed Framework), and if their objective is to maintain internal legitimacy and ensure that their perceived external enemies behave cautiously toward them, they are not – with their permanently-at-imminent-war posture – behaving completely irrationally.

It is certainly not to be assumed that North Korea wants its nuclear weapons for aggressive rather than defensive reasons. It is well aware that any use of its weapons against South Korea, Japan or anyone else would not only be homicidal but suicidal, given the enormous weight of the military forces that are ranged against them.

There are those who argue that any attempt to restart negotiations with the present regime is ‘appeasement’ (as Christopher Hill has described it) - or ‘magical thinking’ (Nicholas Eberstadt), or at the very least unproductive (Richard Haass). But I have been more attracted by the counter-arguments of others like Bill Perry – who I don’t think anyone could call either naïve or an appeaser – that negotiations can bear fruit because there are things that North Korea wants: regime security, above all; international respect or at least acceptance; and (although it has so far been prepared to completely subordinate this to the other two goals) economic support.

The trouble, of course, with any new negotiations is that while the US has been exercising ‘strategic patience’, things have moved on, and some ground will have to be given:

* North Korea is already for practical purposes now a nuclear-armed state, however much we hate to admit it;
* the most that is likely to be achievable for the foreseeable future, in return for credible security guarantees and the like, is a freeze on capability, not a wind-back (with a good starting point being the ‘Three Noes’ proposal from Stanford’s Siegfried Hecker: no new weapons, no better weapons, and no transfer of technology);
* denuclearization only ever likely to be achievable in the context of a broader peace settlement, negotiated over many years; and
* the only chance of getting serious new negotiations started will be for neither side to set preconditions.

Of course none of this is very palatable. But none of the *other* alternatives have been either palatable (like pre-emptive military force), or possible (like urging China to apply food or energy supply pressure on the regime) or productive (like sanctions, other than those narrowly directed to stopping the movement of material and technology).

Restarting negotiations along these lines, even if it won’t achieve denuclearization any time soon, at least offers the possibility that North Korea will start behaving more like a normal state, with normal national interests normally pursued. And if a peacefully negotiated unification is ever to be on the table that is a necessary condition.

President Trump gave some indication during the campaign that he was willing to talk with Kim Jong-un. But whether his instincts as a deal-maker prevail, or his muscular show-America’s- might instincts, or his isolationist instincts prevail, we just don't know. And it is pretty obvious he doesn't know himself.

1. *Oher countries in the region – notably South Korea and Japan, but also Russia – doing nothing to destabilize the situation.*

While Russia periodically tries to play itself back into North East Asia, with its current European and trans-Atlantic preoccupations, continuing economic problems, and declining population, it does not seem destined to be more than a marginal player in the dynamics which concern us here. But both South Korea and Japan are extremely important players, and it is critical that cooler heads prevail in both countries if general stability is to be maintained in the region, and if any kind of environment is to be created in which unification can move forward.

For Japan and South Korea to be on the right side of history in this respect means, for a start, escaping once and for all being *prisoners* of your history, in your relations with each other, and with China, and finding peaceful solutions for the territorial disputes which periodically threaten to inflame that history.

It is perfectly appropriate for each country to build the defence capability it needs to be able to deal itself, to the maximum extent possible, with any security threat that may arise, and Japan’s moves under Prime Minister Abe to free itself of some constitutional restrictions in this respect should be understood in that light. But should either Japan or South Korea seek to acquire military capability that is manifestly destabilizing, or creates much higher risks than any possible rewards – as would certainly be the case if either went nuclear– then you would very definitely be on the wrong side of history.

Of course in the context of the perceived (if not very real in practice) military threat from North Korea, both South Korea and Japan will only moderate their arms build-up if you remain confident about your alliance commitment from the United States -- and that again is something that has been thrown into real doubt by many of Trump’s statements during the campaign, though he has been doing some back-pedalling since.

We in South Korea, and Japan, and in South East Asia and Australia know that our alliance relationships and partnerships with the US have been a strongly stabilizing factor in the region in the past, and want them to continue.

But we know that with as many uncertainties as there now are about the extent and depth of US commitment to the region, and – though hopefully these fears will be unrealized – with the very real prospect of some serious errors of judgement being made by Washington, all of America’s allies and partners in the region are going to have to do more for ourselves, work together more, and rely less on the US getting it right for us. Our new mantra may have to be: More self-reliance. More Asia. Less America.

All of us in the region need to work hard to develop deep and multi-layered engagement, both economic and political, with *both* China and the US, to avoid a zero sum game developing in which we will be forced to choose between them. That’s in the best individual interests of all of us, but for South Korea and Japan it will also be crucial in maintaining wider peace in North East Asia.

And without such a stable underlying peace, with the two giants living comfortably and cooperatively with each other, and no one else engaged in destabilizing behaviour, there is not much point in even dreaming about the day when the two Koreas can be peacefully united.

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