

## IA-Forum Interview: Dr. James J. Przystup

IA-Forum speaks with Dr. James J. Przystup, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of National Strategic Studies at the National Defense about Korea. By Steve Kochheiser.  
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International Affairs Forum: In the statements made prior to the six-party talks, it has become very evident that there are a variety of objectives represented by its members. What are the ultimate goals of these nations?

Dr. James J. Przystup: I think there is an agreement, at least among five of them. Even North Korea says denuclearization is its objective. I think that there is a clear understanding, in a broad sense, that we are all against war, we are all against collapse, and we are all for a nuclear free peninsula.

In each capital, however, the priorities are different. For example, our focus is clearly on the nuclear issue. I think in China and South Korea, the focus is more on preventing collapse and over time evolving a solution to the nuclear question. The Japanese are much closer to the U.S. focus but they also have an added objective of the abductees issue. I think the Russians, though they have not said much recently, are very much along the lines of the South Koreans and the Chinese.

IA-Forum: What do you feel is the current influence of the Chinese over the Korean Peninsula?

Dr. Przystup: Clearly it has been growing and it's very real. In South Korea, the Chinese have gotten very high marks for encouraging North Korean dialogue with the South and for extending economic assistance. This is basically keeping North Korea afloat, thus preventing what South Korea's nightmare scenario of a economic collapse there. China also gets high marks, for now, for being the ROKs number one trading partner. So, in terms of what is going on in the South, I think Chinese influence has been growing. That does not mean that it is not without creating problems on the peninsula.

For example, there was the incident last summer when they claimed half the peninsula, which did not go over well in the South. The second is that as the South starts to feel that it is gaining traction with the North, which it feels that it is

doing through this series of economic projects and the rail links, they become increasingly concerned with Chinese influence in the North. Increased trade and investment that the Chinese have in the North is becoming a matter of some concern among South Koreans. So overall the Chinese have gotten high marks for the positive role they are perceived to have played and are playing on the peninsula. But below the surface there are concerns that are very real with respect to Chinese ambitions on the peninsula and particularly its involvement in the North.

IA-Forum: There have been arguments on both sides for either the so-called “hard-line” approach to the North by the U.S. and South Korea’s “sunshine policy” of engagement and aid to the North. Which of these approaches do you think will prove most effective in the end to encourage the North to agree to disarmament?

Dr. Przystup: I’ve watched this too many times for too long. You could make a case for engagement, but you could also make another case as long as the North is in the position it is in right now in which it is receiving benefits from both the South and China. That’s not a very bad position to be in, and they still have a nuclear weapons program. I’m skeptical that incentives alone are going to persuade the North and that threats alone will persuade the North. I think it is trying to find the proper mix of incentives and disincentives to deal with this issue.

The issue is always posed, “What do we need to do to persuade the North?” The bigger issue with the North is their decision of which way they’re really going to go. Over the past year the North Koreans have been very skillful in not returning to the talks. In so doing, what they have done is allowed us to debate and negotiate among ourselves about what we should do and what we shouldn’t do. The bottom line is a decision that North Korea has to make, what it is going to do. I think that is where the focus should be, not whether we should give them this or give them that. They could have called anytime in the past year and said “we are going to turn in our nuclear weapons, here is the deal,” but they have not done that.

IA-Forum: A major concern is that North Korea will sell nuclear material, which could then be used against the United States or its allies. What do you believe to be the current risk of North Korea selling nuclear material to rouge states or groups like al Qaeda?

Dr. Przystup: As long as their program is running and they are producing more plutonium and highly enriched uranium, this is a risk that cannot be discounted. I think what we need to make very clear to the North is that our interest is that that nuclear material does not get off of the peninsula. We need to communicate that very forcefully. That is where the real threat is, this diffusion of fissile material

and nuclear technology off the peninsula. To me, that is the focus of our security concerns.

IA-Forum: What is the current risk of an attack by North Korea?

Dr. Przystup: You cannot discount it, but I think they understand that that would be the end of the regime. On the same token, we should make it very clear to the North that if that nuclear material moves off the peninsula and is used somewhere else in the world, that is an act of war and we will consider it in that fashion. The regime is focused very much on its own survival and that it is not going to take steps that would put that survival at stake. That said, because this government is so nontransparent, so opaque, you really do not know what these people are going to do and how things could happen. So you have got to be prepared to deal with this wide range of contingencies from proliferation off the peninsula to conventional attack that could be triggered by anything. In dealing with this kind of a state, if a guy wakes up in the morning and says to push a button, someone will push it for him.

IA-Forum: Considering these threats posed by North Korea, of the possible agreement(s) that may result from the six-party talks, what type of provisions do you foresee?

Dr. Przystup: The first thing that North Korea needs to admit to is that it has a highly enriched uranium program. If it does not do that, there are not going to be any talks. If they do, there will be issues related to verification which are going to be very difficult. We are going to demand a degree of transparency that the North has never accepted in the past.

There are also issues related to normalization of relations. That could follow an agreement that would terminate the nuclear program. There will certainly be clear understandings reached under the provisions of energy and economic assistance. That's basically the bargain – guns for butter.

IA-Forum: What will be the impact on negotiations will the Japanese abduction issue and other relatively minor issues, when compared to the nuclear question, present?

Dr. Przystup: Well that is not a minor issue in Japan where the government is going to be faced with a very hostile reception in the Diet if they get the nuclear agreement and fail to address the abductees issue. That is going to make it very difficult to provide the kind of funding that is going to be expected of Japan in terms of meeting its commitments as part of any of the six-party agreements. So it is an issue that could really bedevil the talks. At a government level, there is a clear consensus that the nuclear issue is the critical issue. At the political level, it is almost the reverse, where the focus is on the abductees and that is what

drives the politics of the issue. That is what, over time, could influence how Japan responds to whatever deals are reached in the six-party framework.

IA-Forum: Considering the divergence in the past decade of the policies of South Korea and the United States toward the North, what impact do you feel any agreement reached in the six party talks would have on the relations between both nations?

Dr. Przystup: How to deal with the North has been the subject of much discussion. The focus in the U.S. has been more on pressure and the focus in the South has been more on accommodation. So trying to bring those two lines together have been very, very difficult. But I think there is a clear commitment on both sides, in Washington and Seoul, on denuclearization. I think what happened in South Korea's energy package is that they became very concerned with what they were hearing in Washington over the course of the spring about tightening the economic noose, moving to the Security Council, and perhaps moving to sanctions. So you had the announcement of this huge energy package that puts the North clearly on the spot in terms of its bona fides; hear are the talks, are you coming, and here is what you get.

You must make a fundamental strategic decision. I think in terms of denuclearization both the U.S. and the ROK are very focused on it. The question is how do you balance the priorities. The South is not inclined to pressure the North to the point where you could induce instability in the North that could raise the prospect of collapse or the nightmare scenario. Our focus is on resolving the nuclear issue and if we feel we have to use pressure, we are going to move to increase pressure. That could produce a type of nightmare scenario that the South does not want to see.

IA-Forum: About this "nightmare scenario" or the collapse of North Korea, what would be the immediate and long term regional consequences of such an event?

Dr. Przystup: The immediate consequences faced by the South would be a very difficult economic/financial situation. Coming up for the money to deal with that is difficult. They saw what happened in Germany and they understand what the costs are. The costs here are going to be exponentially greater than what they were with regard to German reunification. At the same time, because the costs are so great, it means others are going to get involved in this. That means the Chinese, the Japanese, and the United States. From the Korean perspective, after you get beyond collapse as a nightmare scenario, the ultimate nightmare scenario is the great powers getting involved once again on the peninsula because that always led to instability from a Korean perspective. That is going to be a large part of what happens because they are going to need the money. If someone is going to put up the money, they are going to look for ways that address their own interests. This is going to be a very dynamic situation in the immediate aftermath of any reunification scenario.

You do not want to say that the past is prologue, but the past is that when the great powers get involved, things get destabilized on the peninsula. Ultimately, you have to be optimistic that things will work out and that the past is not really prologue. I think that a unified Korea is going to find that the relationship with the United States is very important one and that the alliance is very important in the long term.

In February 2001, I was part of the Council on Foreign Relations Korea Task Force and we met with Kim Dae-jung. This was eight months after the summit and we asked him this question “is there an alliance in the future?” Even after reunification was the focus of the question. He said, “Well, yes, and I will tell you why. To the north we have these great land powers, China and Russia. To the east, we have this great maritime power, Japan.” He then said, “That is where you fit in. They are not moving and we are not moving. We have to find a way to balance their influence on the peninsula.” He said that is where the United States comes in from a Korean perspective. He sounded very much like Hans Morgenthau. It was a very “realpolitik” analysis of Korea’s situation and the challenges that a united Korea is going to face.

Over the short term it is going to be a difficult process of working our way through this. Over the long term, I think the prospects are very good for the U.S.-Korean relationship. But I would also say that even though we have these differences in how we are approaching the North, it is very important to understand that the alliance is very fundamental to how this gets resolved. Because even given the internal complexities that affect the relationship now between the U.S. and the ROK, the reality of the alliance means that we can do things and talk confidentially about things in ways that we cannot do with countries that are not our allies. An alliance relationship is fundamentally different from relationships with non-allies. It is a very high value component in this relationship; it really is its foundation. Yes, things are difficult, but we have gone through this in the past and I have seen the way the alliance has worked to pull things together. I am very confident that we will get through this patch as well.

IA-Forum: As a final question, what do you think will ultimately be required for the six-party talks to be successful in the end?

Dr. Przystup: I think the key to success is the North Koreans wanting to admit that they have a highly enriched uranium program and also making a commitment to denuclearize. Dependent on that is the recognition on our part that we will have to give something to get that. That means in some way, shape, or form, the five parties will have to meet the demands of the North Korea economic needs. How that gets packaged, I don’t know, but that is the basic trade off, guns for butter. That is a very difficult choice on the part of the North. I think they see a nuclear weapons program as really the regime’s guarantee of survival. In the past, we went through this before in part of the agreed

framework. Part of the package then was an agreement to move toward normalization of relations. The North really pulled back from it. That could be part a package that ultimately results from this strategic choice that the North has to make. Once that is resolved and once you have an agreement on denuclearization, things can move then toward discussions over normalization, which could be part of the package.

One thing we have to be very clear about is that the North has been very focused on regime survival and that is one thing we cannot guarantee. We can talk about providing aid, investment, training, technical advice and all the rest of that. But we cannot guarantee the regime survival. That depends on the ability of the regime to govern and governance issues that we cannot guarantee. So if that is what the North is expecting, we cannot do that. What I would expect to come out of this, if it ends happily, is that the peninsula is denuclearized. In return for its commitment to denuclearization, the other five parties address North Korea's economic needs. We have already talked many times that we are not going to attack them. We can repeat that again as part of the package. We can move from that very quickly to talks about the establishment of diplomatic relations. So that is the picture, the way I see it.

IA-Forum: Thank you, Dr. Przystup.

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### Dr. Przystup Bio

Dr. James J. Przystup serves as a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of National Strategic Studies at the National Defense. Most recently, from 1994 to 1998, Dr. Przystup served as the Director of the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation. He served on the staff of the United States House of Representatives' Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs; in the private sector, at Itochu and IBM World Trade Americas/Far East Corporation; and in the United States government on the Policy Planning Staff at the Department of State and in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, as Director for Regional Security Strategies on the Policy Planning Staff. In 1983-84, he served as the Deputy Director of the Presidential Advisory Commission on U.S.-Japan relations. Dr. Przystup has specialized in Asian security issues, in particular the U.S.-Japan and the U.S.-Republic of Korea security relationships.

Dr. Przystup was presented with the State Department's Meritorious Honor Award in 1989 and in 1991; he also received the Defense Department's Outstanding Achievement Award in 1992.

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Dr. James J. Przystup graduated *Summa cum Laude* from the University of Detroit and holds an MA in International Relations from the University of Chicago and a Ph.D. in Diplomatic History, also from the University of Chicago. He studied Japanese at Columbia University and at Keio University in Tokyo.

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More information about him and his work can be found at the INSS website:  
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