

International Affairs Forum Interview: Mr. Don Oberdorfer

IA-Forum speaks with Don Oberdorfer, Distinguished Journalist in Residence and Adjunct Professor of International Relations at Johns Hopkins University's Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, D.C. He served as a journalist for 38 years, including 25 years on the Washington Post covering the Nixon White House, Northeast Asia (based in Tokyo) and U.S. diplomacy, including 17 years as Diplomatic Correspondent. He is the author of five books including The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History, on the North-South struggle in Korea. He also served as a U.S. Army lieutenant in Korea immediately following the signing of the armistice in 1953. More information about him can be found on his website: <http://www.donoberdorfer.com>. By Steven Ray Kochheiser. (IA-Forum, 7/15/2005)



International Affairs Forum: What do you think were the reasons for North Korea deciding to rejoin the six-nation talks recently?

Mr. Don Oberdorfer: None of these are simple answers. I wouldn't put myself into the head of the North Korean leadership to try to say what they are thinking. But the fact is that it has been a year since the talks last convened. They had promised to return and they have not done that, they have come under increasing pressure from other nations including the United States, China, South Korea to return to the talks, and they have forged something of a change in their relationship with South Korea which may be helpful. In the past, North Korea has refused to talk to South Korea at all about its nuclear issues saying that that's not their business and that they only wanted to talk to the United States about this. They did not want to give that much credence to South Korea on an issue like this, but that has recently changed.

Beginning on June 17th when the South Korean Minister of Unification, Mr. Chung Dong-young, went to North Korea and met with Kim Jong-il, they had an extensive conversation about the nuclear issue. South Korea has given them assistance in the form of food and fertilizer. Mr. Chung proposed that if the nuclear question was to become settled and if North Korea agrees and actually starts to move toward eliminating its nuclear weapons, South Korea will provide a huge amount of electricity to the North, something that the North desperately needs. How much that played into North Korea's decision, we don't know.

I suspect that it's a combination of external pressures, feeling that they may be able to obtain more assistance by returning to the talks, and an improved attitude on the part of the United States, whose leading figures have made accusations and statements of scorn toward North Korea and its leader, which has recently changed to a more polite way of dealing. So all of those things I think probably entered in.

IA-Forum: What impact do the other members of the talks (specifically the Japanese, Russians, and Chinese) have on the Korean peninsula?

Mr. Oberdorfer: Well the first thing you have to do is look at a map. The Korean Peninsula is like a little thumb coming down from the mainland of Asia. It's surrounded by three of the great powers of the world, all of whom are much bigger than Korea. On the one side, to the East and South are the Japanese islands, one of the most powerful Asian countries for many, many decades. Japan actually invaded and occupied Korea for 35 years from 1910 – 1945. To the North is China: a huge continental size country, it is really the central power in Asia with borders, either land or sea, on almost every other significant country in Northeast Asia and some in Southeast Asia. To the far North and West is Russia.



The Koreans are in this fulcrum of great powers all around them. They've been invaded many, many times throughout their history by larger powers. They're very weary of domination by other powers, but at the same time they have to take into account what other powers have to say because they have a lot of physical power. China is now the number one trading partner of South Korea. Russia and China were the allies of North Korea. Then there is the United States which has a significant role as well. So all of these powers have some influence on North Korea, even though North Korea tries its best to be influenced as little as possible from the outside. That's a very Korean thing. It's true of the South as well. The South tries very hard to formulate and to go along its own course to minimize, as much as it can, the domination or involvement of other countries. But they all have to live in a world in which these other powers surrounding the Korean peninsula are extremely important and geography will never change.

IA-Forum: How serious do you think Kim Jong-Il is about the six-party talks?

Mr. Oberdorfer: Again it's very hard to say. They announced in February that they were suspending their participation in the six party talks because they saw no future in it for them. They announced at the same time that they had nuclear weapons. They suggested, though they didn't say so explicitly, that they would

not give them up. They had privately told the United States' diplomats and others for some months that they had nuclear weapons but they had never said so publicly and in fact they had publicly denied it.

In February they said that, yet in March they said they have become "a full fledged nuclear power" and if they were going to rejoin the talks, it would be on a different basis. That it would be on the basis of them being a nuclear weapons power along with China, Russia, and the United States and that the discussion would have to be a general disarmament discussion. That is a prescription for getting nowhere in the six party talks. Whether they will come with that idea and that policy to the six party talks is not known. If they decided that's the way they're going to play the six party talks, they're probably not going to get anywhere. But we don't know what Kim Jong-Il is going to decide to do. He's now been presented with a package from South Korea, from his own Korean countrymen so to speak, which includes a very great deal of aid, which his country sorely needs. But along with this is the clear proviso that it will not be furnished unless the North Koreans agree to eliminate their nuclear program and actually take steps toward doing so.

IA-Forum: What do you think will be required for these talks to be successful?

Mr. Oberdorfer: What's going to be required is a give and take on all sides. The United States will have to modify its positions; North Korea will have to modify its positions. The United States and North Korea have been kind of the two poles of these talks. The North Korean's main concern, and the reason they are creating nuclear weapons, is fear that the United States will attack them or otherwise try to overthrow their government. The U.S. put a proposal on the table last June; the North Koreans have not accepted it. The U.S. wants to talk about its proposal. But in my opinion it is going to have to change that proposal in substantial ways if it is going to have much of a chance of being the basis for a settlement with North Korea.

IA-Forum: In recent years the policies of the United States and South Korea towards the North have changed or gone in different directions. What do you attribute to the U.S. taking a more hard-line approach and the South taking a so-called "sunshine policy"?

Mr. Oberdorfer: There are two different cases here. There is the case of the South. South Korea has become a democratic country and an increasingly prosperous country. According to the latest figures from the World Bank, South Korea, this little half of a little peninsula coming down from the mainland of Asia has the 10th largest economy on Earth. Since 1987, it has become an increasingly democratic country. In its democracy, the largest segment of its population, in terms of voting power, are the youth or relative youth - people in their 20s, 30s, and early 40s. These people want to get along with North Korea. They do not want to have a conflict with North Korea. The thing that worries

them the most is the possibility of some kind of military conflict on the Korean peninsula. So starting in 1997, with the election of Kim Dae-Jung, a different kind of politician in South Korea, the government in the South has advocated a policy of trying to work with North Korea to find ways to get along with them.

The United States went along with this and was very much in favor of it during the Clinton administration, but when George W. Bush came to power as President, he had very different ideas. He did not want to deal with North Korea. He called it part of an "axis of evil." His government had some rather strict requirements for dealing with North Korea. Moreover, in the summer of 2002, the Bush Administration learned that the North Koreans had been moving rather rapidly to create a different kind of nuclear weapons project based on highly enriched uranium, which was different from the one based on plutonium that had been shut down under an agreement with the United States in 1994.

So the Bush Administration, in the fall of 2002, accused the North Koreans of violating their promises to shut down their nuclear program. Whereupon, the North Koreans restarted the nuclear program that had been shut down, began making plutonium which is one of the means of making atomic weapons, and the conflict has escalated from there. So on the one hand, South Korea has been moving toward a greater degree of engagement with the North. On the other hand, the U.S. government, until recently, has been moving toward a greater degree of confrontation with the North. So obviously you have two very different viewpoints here.

IA-Forum: How seriously do you think the South Korean people take the threat of North Korea?

Mr. Oberdorfer: It's hard to answer for a whole people. Obviously in a democratic country like South Korea you have different views of different people. But in general, South Koreans are much less worried about North Korea than they used to be. In the first place, the two countries are not really comparable. The economic power of South Korea is enormous and the economy of North Korea is a disaster area. It's entirely clear that if there ever is to be a reunification of the country, it is going to be under the leadership of South Korea. The people in South Korea, the majority, do not see any tangible, immediate threat from the North. It is true that the South Korean government has told the government in North Korea that it feels threatened by a North Korean nuclear weapons program and that is the reason why it insists on dealing with this in bilateral conversations. But there is much less concern, there is much less popular worry about the physical side of an attack from North Korea than was the case a few years ago or certainly decades before when South Korea was ruled by a military group for whom military questions were extremely important.

IA-Forum: Many of those opposed to the military operations in Iraq believe that America should have taken more of a focus on North Korea. What impact do you think the Iraq war has had on the talks with North Korea?

Mr. Oberdorfer: I would say there are two principal effects. The Iraq War has drained 90% of the attention and emphasis and urgency of the U.S. government. Were it not for the Iraq War, a lot more attention and activity would have been devoted to the North Korean nuclear program, which is a very serious program. It is ironic that the U.S. went to war in Iraq, in part, because of the belief that Iraq was harboring a nuclear weapons program when it turned out that this was not the case. Whereas North Korea, which has announced that it has nuclear weapons and is working on more all the time, has been less of a priority. So that's one factor - the U.S. domestic factor. Another factor is that the North Koreans have seen what the United States did in Iraq and this just casts a shiver up their spine. A North Korean military officer said "we saw what you did in Iraq and we're not going to let you do this to us." Which is one drive, one reason they were so determined to have nuclear weapons.

IA-Forum: What do you feel the risk is right now of a nuclear or conventional military strike by North Korea?

Mr. Oberdorfer: I'd say that threat is minimal. North Korea knows that if they were ever to use a nuclear weapon against any other country, the retaliation would be swift and devastating. The U.S. doesn't just have a few nuclear weapons; the United States has thousands of nuclear weapons, any one of which is many, many times more powerful than anything North Korea is likely to be able to assemble. That is not to say that any nuclear weapon is not powerful. We know that the kind of weapon that North Korea is working on, the plutonium weapon, destroyed much of the Japanese city Nagasaki in August 1945. The highly enriched uranium weapon that North Korea is working on, destroyed Hiroshima in 1945. But I think the chances that they would actually use a nuclear weapon are not very good. What concerns the United States more than that is the possibility that they might transfer or sell nuclear materials to some other country or group like al Qaeda. This is particularly worrisome because North Korea has sold ballistic missiles to countries in the Middle East.

IA-Forum: Ultimately, what do you think will bring a peaceful situation to the Korean situation?

Mr. Oberdorfer: Well, there is going to have to be some kind of resolution to the nuclear question, whether it is an agreement made at the talks or a decision to continue despite the lack of an agreement. But that's the most immediate question for North Korea and its neighbors as well as the United States. In the longer run, what happens on the Korean peninsula is going to be determined, in part, by the kind of country that North Korea wants to become. In the summer of 2002, Kim Jong-Il moved toward a different kind of economy, one based more on

money rather than on handouts, showing that he understands that their current economy is not one that can move the country into an eventual sustenance, to say nothing of prosperity. I think he still understands that, but is unable to move further in that direction because of the nuclear issue. So how he is going to deal with the economic issue, his political relationship with his neighbors as well as with the United States, and with the military issue of nuclear weapons; all of these things are going to go a long to determining the future of North Korea.

IA-Forum: Thank you, Mr. Oberdorfer.

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