



Korea at the Crossroads

Interview with Dr. Peter Roell

August 2018

Abstract

The interview focuses on new developments on the Korean Peninsula with respect to regional and international political, economic and military aspects. The author remains somewhat sceptical regarding the question of complete denuclearization. He contends that for the time being the EU should maintain its policy of critical engagement towards North Korea; for its part, Germany is prepared to support the South Korean Government by way of technical assistance and expertise if and when necessary.

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Analysis

Worcester: Dr. Roell, you recently attended a security conference in South Korea. How would you characterize the overall attitude among the population following the first meeting between South Korean President, Moon Jae-in and North Korean Leader, Kim Jong-un, in Panmunjom held on 27th April 2018?

Roell: Overall, the meeting met with a positive response: while 78.3% population welcomed the meeting, a surprising 64% believed that North Korea will denuclearize.

Worcester: Kim Jong-un seems keen to meet with US President Donald Trump. If so, what in your estimation, might be his reasons?

Roell: He is interested in such a meeting for a number of reasons. The threat of an attack on North Korea, possibly even a nuclear strike, seems to have focused Kim's mind and appears to have been taken very seriously. Even China has responded by deploying troops close to the border. Evidently, China understands that North Korea only stands to lose in the event of a conflict with the US.

Furthermore, drastic UN sanctions are taking effect: Kim acknowledges the long-term disadvantages for his position, and is thus looking for ways to save his regime and reduce sanctions.

North Korea has invested massive sums of money in nuclear weapons and missiles: Hence in view of the country's status as a nuclear power, Kim is now eager to invest in the economy. He is also aware that the country's huge conventional armed forces (1.3 million troops) are completely out of date and in need of modernisation. Only on the basis of a strong economy can Kim hope to achieve such modernisation. Part of such modernisation entails a reduction in military outlay, more particularly, headcount and general reorganisation of armed forces. China represents a key role model in this process.

Worcester: What role does China play with reference to initiating a US, North Korea dialogue?

Roell: Again, China assumes a significant role in this process. When China first enforced UN sanctions which culminated in a 95% trade reduction, North Korea was left in no doubt as to the identity of the regional strongman, notwithstanding that Beijing has somewhat loosened these sanctions.

Worcester: How would you appraise the South Korean media response following the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore on 12th June 2018?

Roell: The South Korean newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* dismissed the meeting as "completely absurd", pointing out that there was no mention of a deadline for North Korea's dismantlement of nuclear weapons. *The Hankyoreh*, by contrast, wrote that the meeting was positive, simply by virtue of it having taken place.

Worcester: And how would you assess the meeting?

Roell: Sound personal contacts are of great significance in Asia. I see the meeting as a declaration of intent and a first step towards a relaxation of tensions within the region, but no more than that.

Worcester: Ahead of the Trump-Kim summit Washington has repeatedly called for the complete, verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Do you believe that Kim Jong-un will deliver in the near future?

Roell: In my opinion he will never unilaterally abandon his nuclear weapons. His aim is a step-by step approach to the lifting of sanctions and other benefits prior to a partial dismantling of North Korea's nuclear capabilities.



Worcester: Do you believe that the US plans to reduce its military commitment and expenditure in South Korea in the foreseeable future?

Roell: I believe that there will be neither US troop reduction nor cuts in spending in South Korea for the foreseeable future. On the contrary, South Korea moves forward with plans to buy more F-35A Stealth Fighter jets to boost the ROC's precision strike capability against North Korea's missile and command and control targets. On July 20, 2018 Major Kyun Jung, Republic of Korea Air Force, conducted his first mission aboard a F-35A jet at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona.

Worcester: Although North Korea has pledged to "denuclearize" several times in 2018, how it will do this remains unclear. What could be North Korea's security perspective?

Roell: From North Korea's perspective, the U.S. withdrawal of its nuclear umbrella from South Korea is a plausible scenario, and that the former would demand free zones or free countries, such as Japan, which also falls under the U.S. nuclear umbrella; here, Kim Jong-un may also demand that denuclearization be on equal terms.

Worcester: On 29 June 2018, US Intelligence leaked to NBC that the DPRK has increased development of fuel for nuclear weapons at multiple secret sites in recent months. Would you consider this fake news?

Roell: I am not a member of the US Intelligence Community and have no access to their HUMINT and SIGNAL Intelligence capabilities, but the information fits very well into several Open Sources Information, namely, that Kim Jong-un will never completely dismantle his nuclear and missile arsenal.

Moreover, at end of July US Intelligence sources claim that North Korea continues to produce intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) at the Sanum-dong site outside Pyongyang.

Worcester: On the other hand, North Korean experts announced that the country has started taking apart the engine test site at the Sohae Satellite Launching Station, and that it has also begun dismantling a rail-mounted building at the Sohae station. Does this not signalise a clear confidence-building measure?

Roell: Yes, it is a confidence-building measure, but it does not limit North Korea's production of additional missiles, and it is still unclear whether North Korea planned to demolish the entire site. Furthermore, to date Pyongyang has yet to begin disposal of its fissile materials or nuclear facilities, nor has it announced if and when it will dismantle its missiles with nuclear weapons delivery capability.

Worcester: Do you see any positive development in the bilateral relations?

Roell: One ought to not expect too much too soon. There is still considerable mistrust on both sides. However, at the second general-level military talks on July 31, delegates convened at the Peace House, the South Korean building inside Panmunjom to discuss withdrawal of troops and equipment from guard posts inside the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

The question of how to restore military communication channels on the Western and Eastern coast had been already discussed during their initial meeting in June: the discussion pivoted on the transformation of the areas around the disputed Northern Limit Line (NLL) on the West coast into a maritime "peace zone" and demilitarizing the Joint Security Area (JSA) in Panmunjom. A joint recovery of the remains of people killed during the Korean War now seems likely.

In discussions, the North Koreans insist that sanctions must be reduced and ultimately removed before bilateral relations can improve.



Worcester: What should be the minimum condition for the US negotiations with North Korea?

Roell: We should follow North Korea's declaration process of its nuclear sites and missile capabilities very closely over the next few months.

Furthermore, beginning with inspection of the Yongbyon nuclear complex, Pyongyang should allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to verify compliance with any terms of denuclearization.

Worcester: Is the IAEA ready to assist in the denuclearization process?

Roell: Yes, it is, but it must first increase its staff. Perhaps this would require up to 300 additional, highly qualified inspectors. Members of the IAEA have already promised to support the agency financially.

Worcester: In their Joint Statement in Singapore, President Trump and Kim Jong-un agreed in clause 4 that "The United States and the DPRK commit to recovering POW/MIA remains, including the immediate repatriation of those already identified". Do you see some progress in this regard?

Roell: Yes, I do. On July 27, 2018 a US cargo plane carrying the remains of 55 US soldiers – handed over by North Korea – landed at an American Air Force base in South Korea. The remains will then be sent to Hawaii for forensic testing to verify identification of the slain troops.

Worcester: In what form might Germany endorse a step-by-step process of rapprochement between South and North Korea?

Roell: During his visit to Seoul in July 2018, Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs, Heiko Maas pledged support in the form of technical aid and expertise at the appropriate time. Germany has been down this road in the past, as witnessed in the difficult negotiations with Iran and the reduction of nuclear warheads in Europe. He was also quite clear that North Korea must walk the talk, since sanctions will otherwise remain in place.

Worcester: What position should be adopted by the European Union?

Roell: For the time being the EU should maintain its policy of critical engagement towards North Korea, namely, that the latter's obligations to de-nuclearize be upheld, and that it further enable future negotiations towards a peaceful solution. That the EU should retain close contact with the South Korean Government to discuss common South-North Korean projects – a move potentially beneficial for an EU engagement – is also advisable. The exchange of views with China, Russia, Japan as well as the US could prove beneficial for stimulating the political process on the Korean Peninsula.

Worcester: And what of China's role on the Korean Peninsula?

Roell: In the short term, China's interest centres on integrating North Korea into a regional system that will enshrine both stability and prosperity. Pyongyang has worked with Beijing and Seoul on the development of special Economic Zones and, the DPRK and the RoK have already come to special agreements on linking roads and railroads in June 2018.

Beijing also has an eye on the huge mineral reserves beneath the mountainous provinces in the North. Estimates of the value of these resources range from \$6 trillion to \$10 trillion, whereby the latter figure would be the more accurate.

In its Grand Strategy and foreign policy interests, China seeks regional dominance by 2021, and global hegemony by 2049. According to this scenario, the Korean Peninsula and East Asia will play an important role.



Worcester: What are Russia's interests in this scenario?

Roell: In this context, Russia seeks a more or less neutral position: it views the US-North Korea agreement as fragile. Moscow is willing to support the process, and President Putin is convinced of the importance of international support, since he believes that the US and North Korea alone would be unable to solve the problem.

In their meeting on June 2018, South Korea's President Moon and President Putin reached an understanding on a comprehensive network of oil and gas pipelines passing through North Korea and are commencing talks on a free-trade agreement with South Korea. In a briefing with his cabinet, President Moon pointed out that launching joint research on connecting railroads, electrical grid and natural-gas lines would be a sound starting point for a potential trilateral cooperation between South and North Korea and Russia.

Worcester: How would you estimate the stability of the North Korean regime?

Roell: Kim Jong-un has consolidated his power by eliminating potential rivals, even high-ranking family members and military leaders. Similarly, he has initiated steps to diminish the political influence of the military, and appointed people who share his vision. In other words, in my view the regime is stable.

Kim is keen to learn from both China and Vietnam as to how one can open up the country and modernise without subsequent loss of power.

Worcester: One final question: What are the challenges facing western intelligence services with respect to intelligence gathering in East Asia in general, and to the Korean peninsula in particular?

Roell: Any development in the region is of great significance for western decision-makers. However, such intelligence represents a serious challenge. Furthermore, the promises made at the meeting between Moon-Kim in Panmunjom, on 27th April, and the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore on 12th June must be verified.

Worcester: Dr. Roell, I thank you for the interview.

Remarks: The opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



About the Author of this Issue

Dr Peter Roell has been President of the Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) in Berlin since January 2006. His former post was as Senior Advisor for Foreign and Security Policy at the Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the EU in Brussels. While in Germany, he served the German Government as Director of the Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Africa (Sub-Sahara) Department and at German embassies in the Near and Middle East, and in Asia.

Dr Roell studied sinology and political sciences at the universities of Bonn, Taipei and Heidelberg. He gained his Ph.D. from the Ruprecht-Karls-University, Heidelberg.

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Dr Peter Roell

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