

---

# Session 1

Date: April 25, 2012

Time: 15:45-17:00

Place: Grand Ballroom

---

## American Foreign Policy towards the Korean Peninsula

Organizing Institution: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

Panel Chair: Victor Cha, CSIS

Panelists: Lucy Williamson (Moderator), BBC  
Christopher Hill, University of Denver  
Scott Snyder, Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)  
Bruce Klingner, The Heritage Foundation

Young Scholars: Seukhoon Paul Choi, CFR  
Steven Denney, Yonsei University

“The subject of American foreign policy towards the Korean Peninsula is something that is always talked about here in Seoul,” moderator Ms. Lucy Williamson said to start the panel. To shed greater insight on this topic, Dr. Victor Cha provided an overview of US foreign policy towards Asia during the Obama administration, former Ambassador Christopher Hill discussed US relations with countries in Northeast Asia, Mr. Scott Snyder identified critical questions that would determine the future of the ROK-US Alliance, and Mr. Bruce Klingner spoke specifically about the US perspective on security in the region.

Cha described the evolution of the Obama administration’s policy towards Asia, noting that the current policy reflects a broad shift from the beginning of Obama’s presidency. Initially, the Obama government recognized Asia’s importance, but as it faced numerous other challenges, it did not consider the region a top priority. Consequently, the limited attention and resources that the administration could devote to Asia required that it identify and pursue one strategic objective for the region. Thus, the focal point for the Obama administration’s original policy towards Asia was improving relations with China and Japan.

It was hoped that facilitating cooperation with these two major powers would establish a stable basis upon which to build the rest of US policy toward Asia. However, US expectations for cooperation with China on a wide array of issues were quickly stifled during the first year of Obama’s presidency. Hopes to further cooperate with Japan were also complicated by the March 2011 disasters. Ultimately, it became evident that an Asia strategy based primarily on cooperation with China and Japan would be unsuccessful, and the administration was required to adjust its approach.

The subsequent shift in policy was both innovative and good, according to Cha. The Obama administra-

---

---

tion effectively changed its policy focus to the G20 and a new trade agenda, which was revealed by Obama's region-wide trip that did not include a visit to Tokyo or Beijing—a first for a US president. This move was a conscious effort to demonstrate a novel Asia policy that was not simply about Japan, China, or Northeast Asian security. On trade, the Obama administration made a complete reversal of its original position. Whereas Obama had once called “timeout” on the free trade agreements passed by the previous administration, he has since become a champion of free trade. Moreover, through the national export initiative, his administration has focused on connecting free trade to the domestic economic agenda, a position reflected in the promotion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

South Korea fits largely into the US policy shift, because whether it is in the G20 or trade, South Korea plays a central role. South Korea hosted the G20 summit and became an important US partner in a variety of initiatives around the world. For Cha, the passage of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement represented a critical component of the shift in Obama's agenda towards trade.

Hill started by noting that among America's many important relationships, the ROK-US relationship ranks high on the list. This was revealed in the high degree of continuity between the Bush and Obama administrations, which trumped the pattern of every new administration “denouncing and renouncing” everything the previous administration said and did. Hill then addressed the following topics: Sino-US relations, US-DPRK relations, and the role of the United States in the region.

In his comments on North Korea, Hill discussed the difficulty in getting the Chinese to cooperate. Despite the United States having high hopes for Chinese cooperation early on, the Obama administration quickly learned about the complexities of dealing with China over an issue like North Korea. The United States has encountered a China with a multitude of internal issues: a slowdown in economic growth, mass rural-urban migration, and evolving state-society relations in a one-party state. The cumulative effect of these internal issues has made China less of an ideal partner in dealing with external issues, such as North Korea.

Hill's assessment of US-DPRK relations was no more optimistic than his appraisal of Sino-US relations. The Obama administration came in with high hopes of restarting the Six-Party Talks. However, after the nuclear test of 2009, officials in the Obama administration were “turned into real hawks.” The February 29 “Leap Day Agreement,” which was the administration's effort to bring the Chinese back into the negotiation process, also ended in failure. These failures have made Hill pessimistic about engagement with North Korea. For the time being, he “expects nothing more out of it.”

Hill concluded by addressing the mischaracterization of the US “pivot.” He rejected the notion that the United States is moving to confront and contain China. The new Asia-centric strategy has more to do with the United States signaling its intent to shift focus away from Iraq and Afghanistan and toward a more important region of the world, which implies US willingness to strengthen its relationship with



South Korea. Responding to comments made at an earlier panel that misunderstandings about the US role in the region are due to a lack of trust between Beijing and Washington, Hill said, “There is a bit of a problem in the Sino-US relationship, but it is not a lack of trust.”

Snyder highlighted the fact that 2012 is a time of political transition in both South Korea and the United States, and he identified four key questions that will shape ROK-US relations in 2013. The first question concerned whether South Korea and the United States will continue to focus on North Korea’s denuclearization as a common objective and a top priority. Snyder found that, unlike in the past when there was uncertainty about the coordination of their objectives, South Korea and the United States under the Lee and Obama administrations have come to an early agreement on this issue that is likely to be sustained into the next year.

The second question dealt with the sustainability of “Global Korea,” about which Snyder was less certain. In his opinion, “Global Korea” is associated with President Lee Myung-bak. As every new president in South Korea desires a unique approach to foreign policy, it is uncertain whether the next government will continue the Global Korea initiatives. Snyder noted this has implications for the future of the ROK-US Alliance, because the Global Korea initiatives have been a source for the expansion and strengthening of the bilateral relationship.

The third question dealt with the nature of US policy toward the Korean Peninsula vis-à-vis the next US administration’s broader policy toward Asia. Snyder noted that while the United States has a clear understanding of what it desires on the Korean Peninsula, contradictions sometimes emerge when these goals are placed in the context of a broader Asia policy. Since US policy toward the peninsula is contingent on its regional policy, focus on the Korean Peninsula is sometimes lost in the bigger picture, which always involves China.

To conclude, Snyder gave the audience a question to ponder. He asked whether the Lee-Obama relation-

---

---

ship, which has been widely touted as a close personal relationship, represents a peak in ROK-US relations, or if it will serve as a platform from which ROK-US relations can be strengthened.

Klingner next analyzed the security component of US policy, discussing issues that influence US policy and the ability of the United States to implement its policy: concerns over the North Korean leadership transition and its behavior, the “Asia pivot”, and defense cuts.

From the viewpoint of US policymakers, the leadership transition in North Korea appears to be on track. Kim Jong-Un has acquired all the necessary ruling titles, and there is no evidence of resistance from other elites—with little likelihood of popular uprising. Furthermore, the increasing flow of information in and out of the country, and the growing number of cell phones, may serve as a future catalyst for change. For the time being, however, there is no challenge to regime stability.

Despite an apparently smooth leadership transition, Klingner expressed some skepticism toward the opinion that all is well on the peninsula. Given North Korea’s opacity, factors leading to a regime overthrow or collapse may be present now, even if not easily noticed. Furthermore, even a stable North Korean regime may act in destabilizing ways—its recent missile launch and threats being prime examples. Also, while the country may have a new leader, Kim Jong-Un seems to be pursuing the dangerous policies of his predecessors. Some observers worry that he is more likely to miscalculate than his father in a way that provokes a military response. Overall, Klingner noted that both the United States and South Korea are less certain now than ever before of how North Korea will behave, making it even harder to predict action during a crisis.

The Obama administration’s “Asia pivot” is a good strategy in its valid premise and multifaceted approach, according to Klingner. He supported the notion that the United States should use its sources of national power—diplomatic, military, economic, and information—to better engage Asia. However, while US allies in Asia have been comforted by this strategy and statements from the US government, Klingner found the strategy lacking in substance. The assumption that the new Asia strategy will result in an increased presence in the Pacific is false for two reasons, he said. First, the reality is that this strategy and the US presence in Asia are not new. They are a continuation of former policies. This strategy is the result of an evolution in policy from previous administrations, and an overview of security documents will reveal similarities between the current strategy and that of George H. W. Bush.

Second, although Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has declared that the United States will strengthen its presence in Asia, there is no evidence to support this claim. None of the forces being drawn down from Europe or Afghanistan are scheduled to be redeployed to the Asia-Pacific. Even initiatives like the Marines’ rotation to Australia are not permanent. This is problematic because allies reassured by the rhetoric of this strategy may incorrectly infer that they do not need to do more for regional security when, in fact, the United States is relying on them to increase their contributions in order to compensate for cuts in the US defense budget.

---

Klingner was also skeptical about whether the United States can fund an ambitious rebalancing strategy and continue to deliver on previous commitments. Adjustments in US defense spending will impact security in the Pacific, and deterrence is only plausible if the United States has sufficient resources to maintain US commitments. There have already been \$300 billion in defense cuts under the Obama administration, with \$486 billion more slated for this year, and a sequestration effective in January of an additional \$5 billion. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that weapons and other programs considered most questionable have already been abandoned. Furthermore, Secretary Panetta testified in February that the proposed budget for Asia will maintain the current bomber, aircraft, and amphibious fleets while reducing overall force levels to pre-Iraq and Afghanistan levels for the Army and Marines; but this too is a false statement, said Klingner. Although US forces in the Pacific may not be reduced, overall cuts in the defense budget will impact the region and degrade the ability of the United States to redeploy capabilities from other areas.

During the question-and-answer session, Williamson inquired about the panelists' thoughts on the North Korean leadership transition under Kim Jong-Un. Hill remarked that "there is less there than meets the eye." The third installment of a dictator in a calcified system is "interesting," but it is not likely that he will change anything. Hill cited the outcome of the "Leap Day Agreement" as evidence that more of the same will occur under Kim Jong-Un. Cha agreed with Hill that it will remain the same, despite many people who were willing to give the new leader the benefit of the doubt. Cha did note, however, a sense of unpredictability regarding Kim Jong-Un compared to his father, Kim Jong-Il.

In closing, questions were asked about the importance of North-South dialogue for American foreign policy towards the peninsula after the upcoming presidential election. Snyder responded that stable North-South relations are a prerequisite for healthy and productive diplomacy toward the region, particularly Sino-US relations. Regarding the future of American foreign policy, Klingner reiterated the well-known adage that politics stops at the water's edge. In his opinion, there will be a continuation of policy regardless of who is elected. A second-term Obama or a first-term Mitt Romney will look at the violation of resolutions and the way Obama was burned by a nuclear test at the beginning of his first term, and thus will take a more calculated approach towards the peninsula.

---