

Pacific Century Institute  
Salon de Palace Garden  
Second Session  
November 4, 2015

**Background:** The PCI 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary dinner in Seoul on May 19, 2015 introduced the idea, articulated by keynote speaker Volker R  he, that South Korea needs to develop a bipartisan, fundamental, strategic policy toward North Korea. To follow up on that initiative, PCI co-founder Spencer Kim offered his Seoul residence in the Palace Garden building as a venue for a series of “salons” in the European style of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in order to bring conservative and progressive opinion-shapers together to discuss the various facets that would be entailed in developing such a bipartisan policy. Selected guests socialize over a convivial dinner and then discuss a specified topic, coordinated by a convener.

The salon discussions are carried out under the Chatham House Rule, which states. *“When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed”.*

**Topic for Session:** [The Ideological divide in the South Korean: how do you define “progressive” and “conservative” in the South Korean context.](#)

**Coordinator:** The convener was a well-known professor who has also held government positions.

**Participants:** Eleven. Ten Koreans, one Korean-American. Some have academic backgrounds (professors), others from journalism. Most had previously held government positions or leadership positions in NGOs or media corporations; some still hold non-governmental leadership positions. Most would be labeled by Korean media as progressive – regardless of that the participant thought they should be labeled. Many people who would be labeled from the conservative side of the spectrum declined invitations to attend the Salon at the last minute.

**Language:** The discussion was in **Korean**.

**Discussion:**

Unfortunately, your position on prospective policies toward North Korea is almost the sole thing that labels you progressive or conservative. Your views on domestic issues can be quite conservative, but if you advocate a more open approach to North Korea, then you get the label of progressive. There should be a better filtering system to categorize.

Several of the participants said they espoused middle-of-the-road policies toward the North but were still labeled as progressive. Others said they felt themselves unfairly mislabeled because of the perception of their positions. One said as a “transformational middle of the roader” his/her belief was that both Koreas needed transformation and both should pursue a middle road.

Some said that South Korean society was tilting too much to the right and that led to those in the middle being seen as on the left. The Park Geun-hye administration likes to paint people with ideas it doesn't like (one participant said that means people with "sensible" ideas) as progressives.

One of the participants recounted that his/her experience as a scholar at a think tank led to the belief that those who do serious analytical work studying North Korea usually end up as progressives. He/she said he/she began as a fierce critic of the North, but then began a serious study of the North using original sources. Frankly, his/her observation is that most conservative scholars usually have not done real serious academic work on the North. As researchers gain some expertise in understanding the North they get more progressive and they study methodologies that might be able to reduce tensions. Conservative academics just retreat to the same old questions, such as "What has engagement ever gotten us?" Conservative academics often lack confidence and fear they don't know the details about the North and are reluctant to go to conferences/events where they would have to debate progressive academics. The more lazy an academic is, the more likely he/she is to be conservative toward the North.

One participant said he/she believed that the capitalistic system was failing Korea in the manner described by Thomas Picketty in his book, "Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Korea has a case of "incurable capitalism" with the rate of capital return greater than the rate of economic growth, leading to an ever greater concentration of wealth. The wealthy elite is using the North Korean issue, and the human rights issue in North Korea, as smoke screens to marginalize progressive forces so they cannot affect change on domestic issues. The core conservative group has no philosophy, no historical sense and no sense of agony for the nation's problems. The two successive conservative administrations have shrunk the public sector and increasingly privatized it. Under Park Geun-hye it is even becoming personalized under the control of an inner circle. Even some conservatives not in the inner circle are now waking up to the reality. A Korean social science scholar has reported that demographic fragmentation in Korea is now in full swing. The sway of money is not new to Korea, however. It is the only country in the world that saw its ruling aristocratic class – the Yangban – disappear without a popular uprising. It melted away as more and more lower-class people began purchasing Yangban certificates from corrupt officials.

A different participant said that by his/her background, and coming from the Kangnam district, he/she should be called a conservative, but because of his/her job title with an NGO some people keep their distance, thinking him/her a leftist. Kangnam is home to the status quo and it is well known that those wishing to keep the status quo vote for the conservative party. However, among his/her neighbors there is seldom any praise for the Park administration; they see her performance as poor. The question, therefore, for progressives, is how they can come up with an election platform that can win the minds and hearts of the electorate and take control of the government. One big problem is the human rights issue in North Korea, on which the conservatives have attacked the progressives with success. Of course, we should solve our own domestic human rights issues before finding fault with others and we need to expose the weaknesses and dishonesties of the conservatives.

A participant asked why the progressive camp is not more aggressive on human rights, allowing the conservative camp to dominate the public debate. After all, during the South Korean dictatorships it was the conservative side that condoned human rights abuses and the progressive side that fought for human rights.

Under the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, a few participants noted, the South did not highlight the North's human rights record since it would seem to the North like interference in its

internal affairs. Those two administrations thought the North's human rights situation could be better addressed through engagement and influencing the North. Otherwise it is just a propaganda war with the North. Human rights is a legitimate issue, but it has to be addressed with a historical perspective and an understanding of what approach can realistically bring some change.

The Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations see the North's human rights issue as an Achilles heel for progressives. Thus, they have been emphasizing it. But there is a hypocrisy to this tactic, both because of their own past involvement in human rights abuses and because their approach has no positive influence on the human rights situation in the North. In fact, it appears that the North considers the whole issue as part of a US plot to provide the rationale for regime overthrow, especially discussion of putting Kim Jong-un on trial at the International Court of Justice.

A participant with legal experience said there should be a reference by both sides to the concept of the universality of human rights. During the Cold War the West used the universality of human rights to attack the Communist bloc with great success. In South Korea the conservative side uses the North's human rights issue to divert attention; the progressives say it is somehow a luxury to talk about the human rights situation in the North. The best approach would be to highlight the universal concept of human rights, divorced from conservative/progressive, and apply it equally to the North and the South. Then we can start to address the issue with common sense and try to transform into the kind of pluralistic society that groups more around the middle, with progressive and conservative fringes, rather than a split down the middle.

Others agreed that the human rights issue has been the subject of political maneuvering that has muddied the issue. One participant noted that it used to be the policy of the Kim Young-sam administration to publicize the names of North Korean defectors as a way of irritating the North. But identifying them is in itself a violation of their human rights, privacy and safety. The policy was reversed in the Kim and Roh administrations and the names were not announced. But the policy was again reversed in the Lee and Park administrations; in other words the rights of defectors are being violated in the name of getting propaganda points on the issue of human rights.

Human rights stories are often blown out of proportion as well. It was publicized as a fact that potential defectors from the North were imprisoned for a second unsuccessful attempt and executed for a third. But now we have stories of a person who only succeeded on her tenth attempt. The whole issue is open to manipulation and exaggeration. Is there a better plan than trying to improve the life of ordinary North Koreans through economic development? A participant replied that the line the Chinese always recite is that human rights are only guaranteed if your stomach is full and your back warm.

One participant noted that there is a plan to use the traveling copy of the Magna Carta (800<sup>th</sup> anniversary) when it comes to Seoul as the impetus for a meeting to discuss the North Korean human rights situation. But the organizers are academics who are the offspring of key officials in the Park and Chun dictatorships who dismissed human rights activists in those times as traitors. It is hypocritical that they do not intend to discuss the impact of the Magna Carta on the Park and Chun eras.

A participant related a report he had heard from a source in the German Asia-Pacific Business Association. The EU proposed to send a delegation to North Korea to discuss human rights in response to an invitation from Kang Sok-joo, the Workers Party foreign affairs guru. The North then agreed. But then the EU abruptly cancelled. Kang was furious, sure that the US had blocked the visit behind the scenes in order to keep the pressure up on human rights.

Several noted that there are also discrepancies in what are traditionally considered conservative and progressive actions. For example, one participant, when he/she was a Blue House foreign affairs advisor, was a strong advocate of the ROK-US alliance but because he/she served in the Roh administration he/she is still presumed by the media as favoring an “independent” foreign policy course. In fact, the Roh administration took many actions – sending Korean troops to Afghanistan, negotiating a Free Trade Agreement with the US – which were “conservative.”

Likewise, a participant said, isn't it logical to say that the North Korean regime, given its nature, is a “conservative” entity? How can it then be progressive to want to engage the North? A participant noted that the labels get in the way. They impede a sincere effort to reach reasonable consensus, and common ground, on ways to improve the country's security and improve the people's welfare.

One participant, who often speaks to groups around the country, says that the labels really get in the way. People label others, sometimes unfairly, but also label themselves. Then they only believe those things they want to hear and dismiss things they don't want to hear. There are only a few who have “open ears” and listen to the speech. Because the participant served many years in the NIS (through three name changes) many just expect him/her to take the “conservative” approach to the North and are surprised when he/she argues for engagement. The labels are a problem; the middle has to be expanded and the extremes pushed out to the sides.

One participant self-identified as a progressive, but said his/her work in establishing a women's human rights movement and a sexual violence counseling center in the early 1990s brought him/her into contact with progressive, conservative, and neutral groups and individuals who were interested in the subjects and were able to work together. But when his/her group also opened a rights center for female North Korean defectors, they became the subject of some criticism. It was interesting to note that female North Korean defectors tend to believe upon arriving that there are no human rights issues in the South and then are surprised when they see activists jailed for their political beliefs. But this process can take five years. After that, some even participate in candlelight vigils of protest. Some of the North Korean defectors this participant works with were shocked by the derogatory remarks about North Korean defectors made by National Assemblywoman Im Su-kyung.

A participant said that his/her experience with non-Koreans through a respected international economic organization was that both North and South Korea were not well understood. There was a need for serious study not only about the two, but also about the epistemology of that study – the methods, validity and scope – so that demonizations and misconceptions could be overcome. Efforts such as the Hanpyong Academy to look at North-South issues, and excellent publications such as Global Asia that try to take an unbiased approach are so important.

A participant familiar with the leadership of Global Asia said a concerted effort has been made to keep the magazine neutral overall, even if specific articles might be written by authors labeled as progressive or conservative. It is the balance that has allowed the magazine to increase its readership.