

U.S. POLICY TOWARD NORTH KOREA: THE IMPACT OF UNTESTED ASSUMPTIONS

A Western diplomat was quoted recently as observing that “We know more about distant galaxies than we do about North Korea.” While this observation clearly is an exaggeration, it demonstrates just how baffled most Western observers, especially Americans, are by what North Koreans say and do. Further, in an admixture of cause and effect, the routine ‘demonization’ of North Korea in American mass media offers fertile grounds for a constant barrage of untested or unproved assumptions that only further exacerbate the state of confusion. Rather than improving our understanding of North Korean objectives for its relationship with the U.S. or with South Korea and Japan, the two major allies of the U.S. in the region, the powers of imagination that many Americans bring to bear in their efforts to discern the enigma that is North Korea often serve primarily to deepen the misunderstanding.

In an attempt to move beyond this impasse, with financial support from the Pacific Century Institute and Ambassador Donald P. Gregg, the Korean Peninsula Affairs Center at Syracuse University convened a workshop organized by Professor Jongwoo Han on November 15, 2010 to explore the topic of “U.S. Policy Toward North Korea: Assumptions Untested or Unproved.” The workshop was intended to highlight the need to sort out what we know or don’t know about North Korea with an intellectual rigor paralleling that applied to the understanding of other phenomenon such as, for example, distant galaxies. In this instance, though, the process of discovery is not related in any way to rocket science. Rather, it is only a matter of analyzing all available information in a rational and objective manner, instead of parroting unexamined verities based on assumptions that seem to be beyond challenge only because of deeply-ingrained habits of the heart. It also requires recognizing that these habits are grounded in a profoundly non-empathetic perspective stemming from the ‘demonization’ that governs almost all official thinking about North Korea in the United States.



The Greggs at the inauguration of the Korean Peninsula Affairs Center in the Maxwell School at Syracuse University.

The workshop was divided into a morning and an afternoon session. Each session included three presentations that were followed by brief reactions from discussants, a lengthy Q&A period and an overall summary. A report on the workshop will be published shortly with full particulars on the participants, the presentations and the ensuing discussions. As a preview, the following is a sampling of the issues raised by the presenters in response to the topic of the workshop.

Gari Ledyard, professor emeritus of Korean studies at Columbia University; opened the morning session with remarks sketching out the differences between ‘The Party of Memory’ and

‘The Party of Forgetting’, as Bruce Cumings has epitomized the contrast between North Korea and the U.S. While there is never a perfect parallel between ‘memory’ and ‘truth’ or ‘forgetting’

and ‘falsity’ in human affairs, the emergence of empathetic understanding is effectively precluded when historical context is either cynically manipulated or cavalierly ignored.

Ralph Cossa, president of Pacific Forum CSIS, addressed the challenges facing the security architecture of Northeast Asia, especially in terms of the evolution of alliance relationships. The impact of untested or unproved assumptions is especially virulent in managing these challenges as core interests of all the political actors in the region are contingent on these relationships. In the end, of course, all actors need to do a better job of clarifying their intentions to avoid any further exacerbation of the zero sum strategic maneuvering already emerging among the parties in the region.

Margaret Herman, professor of political science and director of the Moynihan Institute, addressed the dilemma posed for policymakers by the diametrically opposed perceptions of Kim Jong Il as either unstable and paranoid or a leader who is detail-oriented and a master politician. One way of overcoming the constraints of these conflicting perceptions, Herman argued, is to use assessment-at-a-distance techniques to examine Kim Jong Il’s leadership style in a more empirical or objective way. The application of these techniques reveals a rational pattern of shifting leadership styles triggered by changes in the political context.

The afternoon session began with a presentation by Scott Snyder, director of the Center for U.S.-Korea Policy of the Asia Foundation. Observing that the need for increased dialogue with North Korea ironically is underscored by the declining expectations for the efficacy of such a dialogue, Snyder outlined a series of bilateral steps that would enhance the prospects for a return to the Six Party Talks. Again, as in other areas, the impasses created by reigning assumptions usually can be overcome by a rationale analysis of the oftentimes self-contradictory nature of these assumptions. As an example, the current stalemate in engagement efforts might ‘lock-in’ a perception that North Korea’s neighbors have accepted its declared status as a nuclear weapons state.

Mary E. Lovely, professor of economics in the Maxwell School, gave a presentation in which trade mirror data from receiving countries was employed to assess the state of North Korea’s indigenous industrial capability. There is perhaps no help for it, but Lovely’s findings seemed to confirm the stereotype of her academic discipline. At the same time, however, the findings also confirmed the feasibility of assessing the current state and future prospects of the North Korea economy in a systematic way, instead of simply relying on anecdotal accounts by defectors or observations made by occasional visitors to the country.

The final presentation was by Jae-Jung Suh, associate professor and director of Korea Studies in SAIS at Johns Hopkins University, who delivered a very hard-hitting refutation of the evidence presented by the Joint Civilian-Military Investigation Group in support of its finding that the Ch’ŏnan sinking in March 2010 was caused by a North Korean torpedo. While the presentation was controversial, and even offensive to some workshop participants, its objective was to suggest the need for a further investigation of the incident. Ultimately, as most observers would agree, the critical challenge is to devise a political strategy for moving beyond this tragedy to allow a resumption of dialogue among all the parties.

As these brief vignettes show, the workshop touched on a wide array of issues that are central to the efforts to formulate sound North Korea policies. The goal was not to discover a guile-free way to uncover the 'truth' about North Korea, but to highlight the advantages of a dispassionate consideration of the evidence even if it means that some of the most negative stereotypes of North Korea ultimately are called into question and perhaps even refuted.

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