

NORTH KOREA: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Interview with Joel Wit

Joel Wit is a former U.S. State Department official, where he worked on nuclear arms control, non-proliferation, and North Korea issues. He is a visiting scholar at John Hopkins of Advanced International Studies and is a senior research scholar at Columbia University's Weatherhead East Asian Institute. In addition, he manages the popular North Korea issues website 38 North. During his most recent visit to Seoul, the Yonsei Journal's own Eunsil Park had a chance to sit down with Joel Wit for an interview.

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Eunsil Park: As you emphasize the role of having talks with the North, what is the primary purpose of them? Getting to know North Korea's intentions, or do you believe that the talks will change NK's behavior?

Joel Wit: Talks can serve a lot of purposes, one is that you learn more about the other's intentions; just an overall view of what is going on inside the leadership in Pyongyang. Another purpose is to determine whether it is possible for diplomacy to work. Just because you have talks doesn't mean you have an agreement. One the other hand, you may find a way to create an agreement that serves your interests. I think that this is a very important reason to have to talks. It is not just that we want to be friendly towards North Korea and understand them better. Talks are a way in which can serve your interests in the best way possible.

Eunsil Park: Also, what would you say to those who are suspicious of North Korea's intentions and are afraid of North Korea cheating on agreements?

Joel Wit: You know, that is really naïve. Of course you cannot trust North Korea and you cannot trust any country really. Every country bends the rules to serve their interests. While it is true that they (North Korea) may be worse than others, the point here is whether you can construct agreements that

are in your national interests and in their interests as well. If it is in their interest, they will abide by the agreement. There is always some sort of cheating between countries. So there are mechanisms to deal with compliance, a pretty standard form for international agreements.

Eunsil Park: There are North Korea experts in the US advising differently from you; What is your major critique? What would be the main reason for other experts not concurring with you?

Joel Wit: I want to focus on the Obama administration. Their policy has been in place since 2009 and the bottom line to consider is whether the policy is working or not. That is how to evaluate the policy. Their policy is not working; it is clear. Most people do see it honestly here and in DC. North Korea's weapons of mass destruction have made a lot of progress in the past five years. North Korea has not changed its policy after sanctions. The idea that you can put pressure on Pyongyang to change somehow has not worked.

Other experts, it is interesting to note that this was 5 and 6 years ago, we said their policy would not work. They did not listen to us. But now they are seeing that it does not work. Many Asia experts think that they know, but they don't really understand. They do not have real experience. At the beginning, those who run Asian policy thought they knew and understood well but they didn't. People who have had experience understand a problem more than people who did not have experience. Which is to say, practical experience is much more valuable than academics. People who don't have governmental experience do not know how to structure the policy. Many people talk about what the objectives of the policy should be. These are worthwhile objectives, but when I say "tell me how to do it." Silence. No one can say how to do it. This happens all the time.

Eunsil Park: In an article published in the March 2013 Atlantic Monthly, you laid out 5 myths about North Korea: 1.) North Korean leaders are crazy 2.) North Korea is a failed state 3.) North Korea is a hermit kingdom 4.) North Korea cheats on agreements and 5.) Beijing can solve the problem for us. Since then has any of these myths changed for you? Who was your target audience for the myths?

Joel Wit: No changes. Maybe I could add that there is a myth that Kim Jung-un is a radical or irrational decision maker. I think he is rational. He is new on

the job but rational. The problem with these myths was many people were infected by them. The infections due to this myth led to ineffective policies. One of the big targets was the media., because one of the big problems with the media is that they are not good at covering stories.

Eunsil Park: In South Korea, depending upon the different administrations we have seen dramatic changes in policy towards North Korea; What is your comment on the previous government highlighting engagement and the current government with containment? With which administration do you prefer working?

Joel Wit: When South Korea looks back at history, it is going to become very obvious that the change in policy from Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyung to Lee Myung-bak was a serious mistake. It was a game changing mistake. These policies were entirely misguided, and are clearly a failure. It is clear to me that it had large drawbacks, but compared to the current policy starting from 2008 the situation is much worse than it was before. Lee's policy was the real turning point, a significant turning point for worse. When we are look back at the previous 10 years, North Korea was a small nuclear power.

Eunsil Park: What is your view on Park Geun-hye administration advocating reunification as a “jackpot”?

Joel Wit: I found it to be very superficial. Reunification would be a nightmare not a jackpot, particularly if it is not peaceful. I am not sure why she said that other than probably seeing it as a way to get support for her views. Every study done on instability in North Korea, the possibility of collapse points to reunification as a nightmare. It is not going to be peaceful and not going to happen in the current situation. There are a lot of reasons for this in terms of politics, economy, and security. There have been a lot of experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan dealing with an unstable security situation. Of course, both those cases have not worked out well. One of the lessons from those cases is that there are certain elements of the former government's army or special operations forces, and they are not going to surrender. They are going to keep fighting. Like Japanese soldiers hiding in the cave after WWII. In North Korea, there are a couple hundred or thousand of those guys.

In the event of a collapse, the first thing to do is to restore the security situation. In the case of North Korea, this is going to be really hard. Some

American experts have made an estimate that we need some 500 thousand troops to restore the security situation. That is a lot of troops. That is not going to be possible. It is going to be chaotic. On top of that you can imagine these soldiers who are resisting will attack South Koreans and Americans in the North. And, of course there exists the economic burden, everyone understands that.

Eunsil Park: It seems that you do not believe in Beijing's efforts to deal with North Korea. Do you see that they will change at some point?

Joel Wit: It is possible that they could change their approach, but it is hard to see that now. And I think as a general rule people have been very optimistic about China helping us (the US). Part of the reason for this is that in this belief we do not have to fix it ourselves. We do not have to get our hands dirty. We want to let China fix it. It is a wishful thinking and is a way of avoiding the real issue with the North. However, the Chinese themselves would say they can't fix this problem. It is wishful thinking in a sense when the US talks about North Korea issues with China. It is a dialogue of death. We tell Chinese to fix this problem, we say "You can do it, you have influence, put more pressure on North Korea." But the Chinese tell us "you need to talk to North Korea. That is the solution to the problem."

Eunsil Park: Then, do you support six-party talks?

Joel Wit: It is the place where you are going to negotiate solutions, I don't think it can serve that purpose. I think six-party talks are a nice umbrella under which you would hold more serious discussions bilaterally and multilaterally. Six-party talks can serve a role in allowing everyone to come together and exchange views and ideas. However, it does not play a role as a forum for serious negotiation.

Eunsil Park: You think that if the US wanted to talk with them, North Korea would like to talk?

Joel Wit: North Korea would like to talk but not when there are pre-conditions imposed. It is not just North Korea, any country would not talk if there are pre-conditions imposed. In diplomacy if a country imposes a pre-condition, it is usually a sort of "hidden message" it that it does not really want to talk. I think North Korea sees the situation similarly.

Eunsil Park: What is the first step for the US to change this situation?

Joel Wit: I think the first step would be for the US to re-establish contact with North Korea. There is currently no contact between the US and North Korea. Additionally, they need to start exploring what is possible in the context of renewed six-party talks. You need to see what is possible and isn't possible.

Eunsil Park: North Korea has continued to be a thorn in the international community's side for a long time. Given the amount of attention paid to North Korea and the little meaningful progress made so far, what are we doing wrong?

Joel Wit: The problem with this issue is that in order to have at least a chance of being effective, we need to take steps that may not be politically popular. Particularly this is true in the US. People often say politics is difficult and that is fine. However we will keep saying that and the problem will get worse and worse. At what point can we realize and say, our national interests are more important than day-to-day policy? Honestly, I don't know when or where that point will be. People need to look a little further into the future beyond just the next day. That has been a problem. If people had realized this in 2008, would things be better today? I think that the answer is definitely yes. North Korea would have had only two nuclear tests. They would not have carried out the missile tests which have occurred in the past few years. We would be in a better spot. Now, you and I could meet again in five years, and I guarantee you the situation will get worse under the current policy. There will be more nuclear tests and missile tests, not just space launches but real missile tests.

Eunsil Park: Are those tests a signal that the North wants to talk to us?

Joel Wit: It is not a signal but they are pursuing their national interests in the current situation. It is silly to think that NK would stop these tests given the current situation. No other country unilaterally stops programs if it feels they are necessary to ensure its national security. They wouldn't carry out such tests as a signal. **Y**