

Pacific Century Institute
Salon de Palace Garden
First Session
October 21, 2015

Background: The PCI 25th Anniversary dinner in Seoul on May 19, 2015 introduced the idea, articulated by keynote speaker Volker Rühle, 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 17th to 19th 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 First Session: The Ideological divide in the South Korean media, its impact on the unification issue, and how to overcome the gap

Coordinator: The convener was a longtime Korean journalist who once served as a Washington, DC correspondent and later became CEO of a major South Korean newspaper.

Participants: Sixteen men and two women; all had journalistic careers. Some were still in journalism, some had taken positions in politics or other professions. Most were Korean; a few were Westerners resident in Korea.

Language: The discussion was in English.

Discussion:

In response to the introduction of the topic, several of the participants from the progressive side agreed that some news organizations are politically oriented toward the conservative side and express excessive hostility toward North Korea.

Other participants said a bigger problem than ideological polarization was a lack of professionalism in the Korean media industry. Many younger journalists are not properly trained; they are falling behind international standards. The result is that often there is little pursuit of the truth regardless of where it leads, but instead a tendency to editorialize in what should be factual reporting. Too little attention is paid to the quality of reporting and an acceptance of “trash journalism.”

Some participants pointed to sensationalism, especially in the broadcast industry, as more worrisome than polarization. Fierce competition is also a factor. More and more media outlets are struggling financially, pushing the level of journalism down and sensationalism up in the search for customers.

Some observed that Korea's problems are not unique to Korea. In a democracy it is natural that there will be various media outlets with different opinions. It is not important if they lean left or right but whether they pursue the truth.

One participant expressed deep pessimism about the polarization of the media, saying it reflects a deep polarization in South Korean society that goes back to its unresolved issues concerning Japanese colonial rule and past dictatorial rule. The speaker said that while he/she was neutral on those issues, it was difficult to see how the differences could be overcome through just discussion. Talking seems to accomplish little more than making your mouth tired. Progress can probably only be made if the overall subject of policy toward the North is divided up into smaller topics that can be discussed more dispassionately.

In a reflection on the salon, one participant noted that, given the ideological divide, while there is a need to stimulate dialogue and exchanges between the two Koreas, there is also a need to convince the US, neighboring countries and global organizations to take actions to amplify momentum toward, and reduce impediments to, peaceful settlement of issues and reunification. Sort of a version of Donald Zagoria's "concentric approach" of moving step by step outward into bigger arenas.