

Salon de Palace Garden 4th Session

Time and Date: 7:00 – 9:00 PM, April 18, 2017

Participants: Eleven active or retired prominent members of the Korean media. A retired senior media editor moderated. Pacific Century Institute co-founder Spencer Kim hosted.

The Salon session is the fourth, following up on PCI's 25th Anniversary dinner in Seoul on May 19, 2015. As with those previous sessions, the fourth session follows the Chatham House Rule for discussions in order to ensure frank opinions.

Salon host Spencer Kim gave a lead-in to the participants:

Spencer Kim: Jewish immigrants to the US have built up influence over the past 150 years and now are assisting Israel in critical areas like politics and economy. I've been thinking that we also need to pull together the wisdom of eight million overseas Koreans to help Korea.

Through my long years in the US, I found it somewhat disturbing that the US media and opinion makers met primarily with conservatives when they visited Korea and wondered why. If you think about it, it may actually be natural. Well-off conservatives could afford to acquire English proficiency.

That led me to think out the way to create opportunities for the US leaders to meet with Korea's liberal sectors as well and to hold the PCI Seoul dinner in 2015. Around 400 people attended the dinner. One-fourth of guests were from media and people from academic, political and business circles came too. I heard that Korean journalists almost never met over meals with each other and that the PCI dinner was the first of the sort since the Kim Young-sam administration. The keynote speaker for the dinner was former German Defense minister Volker Rühle. Bill Perry, US Secretary of Defense when Rühle was in office, said the US and Germany were able to build trust after his meeting with Rühle, where he became confident that NATO wouldn't have any problem with Germany after its reunification. Without Rühle, the US wouldn't have had as much trust in Germany in the reunification process, Perry said.

According to Rühle, diverse political factions in Germany had spent months in a locked room until they were able to agree on a satisfactory reunification policy. They agreed to maintain a non-partisan reunification policy regardless of who would take political power in the future and were able to build trust by carrying it out and providing "unconditional" support for that policy toward East Germany for over 20 years. This effort, called "Ostpolitik," won over East Germans' hearts and set a foundation for eventual reunification.

Korea will be able to lay a basis for reunification only when its people overcome the South-South conflict within South Korea to agree on a non-partisan reunification policy and carry out inter-Korean dialogue for a minimum of 20 years. Then what should we do to get to that goal? We held the first Salon session bringing journalists, both progressive and conservative, together. The report on it is posted on the PCI website for your reference. The 2nd Salon

brought 17 to 18 conservative and progressive former government officials together and the 3rd was held with current and former diplomats.

Actually, we had another two sessions last year but didn't publicize them because we didn't want to cause any unintended misunderstanding amid the political climate of the presidential impeachment process. Also we didn't want to give the wrong impression that foreign figures were trying to give unsolicited advice. Therefore today's session is officially a 4th Salon even though it is a sixth one.

While it should be a free discussion, I would hope you explore the way to resolve the current internal conflicts based on mature thoughts as senior members of the media. The easy reaction would be demonizing the other party. I sense such demonizing tendency in the media too. Please discuss with openness keeping in mind how to overcome this tendency.

Moderator:

Just before the discussion began Prof. John Delury had broken an important news story. (The deployment of U.S.S. Carl Vinson in the Korean Peninsula is not true, it sailed in the opposite direction.) In this context, please discuss how to resolve this situation of imminent military confrontation in the peninsula caused by North Korean nuclear issues. Please also diagnose US-Korea and inter-Korean relations in connection with reunification.

First Participant:

It often is said that President Trump is business-minded. Whether it's a state or business, they all have the same goal of pursuing their own interests. But national interests are completely different from those of business. If Trump is confused about them and would pursue the national interests in the spirit of businessman, it is gravely wrong. Abandonment of TPP and NAFTA would be pursuing national interests under the justification of protecting US interests. However, we need to pursue mutual interests in international relations and Trump is confused about this. He is also playing a zero-sum game with North Korea, but there is no 100% winner (unilateral winner) in international relations. I think there is a back channel dialogue going on separately from Trump's open threat to North Korea. The majority of Koreans are against a surgical strike on North Korea.

Second Participant:

The same situation of 100 years ago is repeating itself in the Korean Peninsula. George Santayana said, "those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it," and I am afraid now we are in such a state. The US will be willing to exert her power as the world's most powerful nation. It is only a matter of when and where. However, she wouldn't do so recklessly. I think even the current peninsular situation wouldn't pose another great risk if we pass this volatile period safely. The question is how much longer we (Koreans) will protract this state of division. Our own role is important as much as we need the support from the neighboring powers. As the chick should peck at the egg from inside while the hen does so from the outside at the same time for the chick to emerge from the egg, the formation of internal and external environments (for unification) is important.

Third Participant:

We are receiving a lot of inquiries regarding the crisis state of the peninsula. One executive of a foreign company sent an email regarding contingency plans to evacuate their nationals. It seems tension is more intense as both Trump and Kim Jung-eun are unpredictable. But my judgement is that the worst situation will not happen. The important thing is to make sure the surrounding powers don't make any deal regarding reunification without Koreans involved.

Fourth Participant:

Contrary to hawkish statements against North Korea by President Trump, I sense that the US policy of "strategic patience" is not changing but is even strengthening. Trump's rhetoric has a strong psychological aspect and is designed to impact North Korea and China in order to lead to negotiations. The ideological confrontation between the right and left in Korea is intensifying and I see it as a result of a lack of statesmanship. As for reunification, we need to consider the principle of "among Koreans," which is ironically a proposition by the North.

Fifth Participant:

I think we should rather feel glad and grateful for Trump's emergence. South Korea has been suffering under the North Korea's overall threat for decades. But now that North Korea is armed with nuclear weapons, the situation is different from the past. We should actively cooperate with the US when Trump is in power to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. In an unconventional era, like now, it's advantageous to side with the stronger. We should learn that from the Japanese.

Sixth Participant:

There's a huge gap of understanding about the tensions on the Korean Peninsula both in Korea and the U.S. On the American side, there's a real conversation about the possibility of the situation becoming military relatively soon. In South Korea, where they are holding Presidential election, this is not a top issue. The South Korean public, even willfully, are saying that we're not going to be distracted by this Northern Wind. Regarding Mr. Trump and his administration, there are three ways to handle the North Korean issue. The bottom line boils down to these three: 1) military action; 2) economic sanctions; and, 3) dialogue. Trump has to choose one of the three or he can combine some of them.

Obama took the military option off the table and he didn't want to have a real dialogue with NK. Trump's threat could be bluff, but the option is on the table. The Trump administration has completed a policy review of the three options, but basically they haven't figured about what they are going to do. Still we would be wrong to just say military action is a bluff. If NK decides to test an ICBM on May 25, when the USS Carl Vinson will be here, that would be a very high risk momentum.

One possible scenario is that Trump may feel maximum pressure to do what William Perry said 10 years ago, "Blow up the test pad." That will be definitely under consideration. So as journalists and academics we need to watch this unfold very carefully. Prof. Immanuel

Pastreich of Kyunghee University has developed a theory of how Korea is now facing the Ming-Ching transition period. According to the theory, the U.S. is the late Ming, losing its power, fighting around the world as though it is still the center of the world. Today's China is the new Ching. And Korea is doing the same as it did when it hung with the Ming dynasty, hanging with the US.

Seventh Participant:

I participated in the candlelight protest last year and experienced blood-freezing terror by the hatred between protesters for and against impeachment. It reminds me of the Chosun era when the court was divided between Ming and Ching loyalists. After President Park's impeachment public opinion wishing for an honest government surged but I am afraid such sentiment has weakened as the presidential race goes on.

Eighth Participant:

I appreciate that Spencer Kim holds this kind of gathering in an effort to overcome the South-South conflict. However, in reality, it's not easy to overcome. I was involved in the media movement when I worked for a newspaper. On reflection, it's true that Chosun Ilbo maliciously slandered the Roh administration. Some progressive press unions, nevertheless, demanded that the government "embrace Chosun, Joongang, Donga." However, a great number of progressives regarded them as an object to remove in their postings to online news and others. Also during the Kim Dae-jung government, there was a serious conflict between the conservative media and the government. To look back on it, the Kim administration's tax audit on Cho-Joong-Dongs was pretty politically motivated. The government conducted target investigations on so-called "clan media" corporations. To make it worse, senior members of the Kim Dae-jung government, including Park Ji-won, tried to woo Cho-Joong-Dongs, especially Dong-a Ilbo, asking them to "help" and when those three remained negative toward the government, it thrust the tax audit card at them. It served as a push to turn the relationship between the government and media unhealthy. I think the Roh Moo-hyun administration also employed a childish policy toward the conservative media.

Regarding inter-Korean relations, the past Korean governments maintained the position of opposing North Korea's diplomatic relations with the US and Japan. Our reunification policy toward North Korea is demanding them to choose between two options: following our way or collapsing under pressure. The US also offered an alternative to North Korea, either to accept democracy or head on the path of self-destruction. The existing South-South conflict and the North-South confrontation are not easy to resolve. I believe the discussion is underway between the US and China to solve the North Korean nuclear issue. However, in any negotiation, both parties need to acknowledge and respect their counterpart and mutual trust is critical. I am afraid if building such trust will not be possible under the Trump administration when they talk about "decapitation operations." If the Carl Vinson's sailing toward Korean waters was fake news, it's unbelievable and serious. How can North Korea believe the true intention of the US in the future?

Ninth Participant:

There are two types of businessman. One is entrepreneurship and the other is manufacturing and selling products or services in a traditional manner. But Trump is neither of two, which is very unusual. Of course he started as an entrepreneur and experienced failures, still, he is basically a branding person. He owns nothing other than branding. He is a branding person, but he is also a realist. So he's surrounded by the best people, especially the best lawyers. As President, he's assembled some very good people. And in just 90 days in office, he's sorted out his cabinet. So you don't know if he will be successful or not. The judgement is still out there.

Bill Perry described the Trump administration, of course in private, as "ill-informed and impulsive." Trump seems to believe that the State Department is just talking, doing nothing. So he made a drastic cut to the State budget. Instead he made a huge increase to the defense budget partly in reaction to Obama's deep cuts in defense spending. This is the current state of America under the Trump administration.

I've got two challenges. Recently Susan Thornton (Acting State Department Assistant Secretary for East Asia and the Pacific) disclosed an interesting fact during her briefing, that the decision to deploy THADD had been agreed by the US and Korea a year ago. Korean defense minister Han Min-koo at the time pronounced the position of three Nos: no request from the U.S., no discussion between the two allies, and no plan to adopt the THAAD system. He should have disclosed the truth even if in a closed-door meeting.

The other one is, I wonder why Korean media don't report on the documentary by "Papais" about the irregularities in the presidential election of four years ago where hidden software was used to rig ballot counting. No major news organizations have raised the issue.

First Participant:

It may be so because of general views that such election rigging is impossible.

Seventh Participant:

I think it's because the issues raised by non-main stream media in the past have often turned out not to be true. Furthermore, if there had been fabrication in ballot counting, the opposition candidate camp would have raised an issue as wronged party, but don't they remain silent about it?

Fourth Participant:

Koreans have a tendency to attach more importance on the result, win or lose, than the truth itself. In the NIS agents' illegal online activities case, even if they had been found guilty, general attitudes are like nothing much to do when things are already decided.

Ninth Participant:

I think the role of media is important exactly because of that. Isn't fact-finding the primary responsibility of the media regardless if they are conservative or progressive?

Eighth Participant:

There must be several reasons for main stream media not to cover such stories. The defeat of Lee Hoi-chang was pretty much attributable to the reports on his son's military service scandal. Even though the court later decided that the story was an incorrect report and ruled it as defamation against Lee, the progressives still don't accept the court ruling while the conservatives trust it. The issue of rigged election was buried because the NIS's illegal online activities were covered far more prominently than the ballot counting process.

First Participant:

The criteria for conservatives and progressives are unclear. The conservatives classify the progressives as commies while the progressives attack the conservatives as ultra-rights.

Ninth Participant:

The media should be on the forefront to stop such demonization. If it can become a way to save the country, we should all sign up.

Second Participant:

I would like to share my thought on witnessing the impeachment of Park Geun-hye. Park was drunk on power and met tragedy because she was totally focused on defending her power. The media failed to play their role as they were steeped in the interests of their own company. In the US, I have read a NYT column saying that Hillary lost the election because she acted as if the presidency is not a calling but a career. It means that she cared more about her career than where the US is heading.

Seventh Participant:

It is ironic to see so-called Moon-Bas (radical Moon supporters) are attacking progressive newspapers such as Hankyoreh and Kyunghyang as well, let alone Cho-Joong-Dongs, as media to disappear through abusive postings. Taking sides is going too extreme. They denounce the media for not blindly supporting Moon.

Second Participant:

NYT carried a feature series commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution entitled "How has 70 years of fake news ended." A dissident group created a publication called the "Chronicle of Current News" and reported factually on what was going on in the Soviet Union. It was scrupulous in checking its facts. If eight stories are correct and two are wrong out of 10 news stories, nobody will place trust in a publication.

Ninth Participant:

British historian Niall Ferguson, now a professor at Harvard, has written an authorized biography of Henry Kissinger. It traces Kissinger's ideological development in which he rejected both the idealist and realist models in favor of the pragmatic approach to the actual problems and decisions that face foreign policy practitioners. That is the spirit in which we should look for solutions and write without fear of being criticized by progressives or conservatives.

Fifth Participant:

Here can't be a standard sample. It will take a long time for people to overcome the difference of perspectives.

Sixth Participant:

South Korea's threat perception with NK follows a certain historical pattern. The perception among Americans is that NK is quite close to an ICBM capability and that changes the calculus, the threat perception. NK is a different problem to Americans if these crazy people can blow up American cities. It was one thing if they could blow up Seoul, that's not what Americans think about on a daily basis. That's remote. So the threat perception is very distant. If Americans are being told that NK is about to have a credible capability to press a button and nuke a West Coast city, which is what is happening in the U.S., then the threat perception changes a lot. Historically, there are two different patterns of the threat perception. Right now there's a wide gap between the two.

Fifth Participant:

Why don't we make sure we are on the side of the winner.

Footnote:

On the suggestion by the moderator 11 participants voted on "who do you think will be elected as the next president?" by raising their hands. The majority saw Moon as the most likely to be elected: 7 for Moon Jae-in, 3 for Ahn Chul-soo, 1 undecided.