

North Korea Denuclearization

On the 65th anniversary of armistice from the Korean War, the Nuclear Security Working Group and member Peter Huessy hosted a group from the Stanford Freeman Spogli Institute for a breakfast meeting at the Capitol Hill Club. The panel, moderated by NSWG chair Janne Nolan, included former Ambassador to South Korea Kathleen Stephens, expert in inter-Korean affairs Dr. Gi-Wook Shin, and nuclear expert Dr. Scott Sagan. Each of the panelists agreed that the reduction of tensions since 2017 is beneficial, but some raised concerns about the administration's ability to secure a favorable deal without sacrificing vital concessions. Other obstacles to creating a lasting agreement include the topic of missile R&D, IAEA verification, and removal of US troops from South Korea.

Dr. Sagan highlighted just how fragile US-North Korean deterrence currently is, particularly because of Pyongyang's fear of US preemption. Sagan argued that if North Korea were to get a false warning of an incoming ICBM (like Hawaii did in January 2018), Korean officials would be more likely to treat it as a serious attack. Compared to the US, North Korea has less precise warning systems, less redundant nuclear command and control, and its workforce is less likely to admit mistake for fear of retribution.

Dr. Shin noted the significance behind the increase in frequency of meetings between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un. Now that we have engaged North Korea diplomatically, it will be hard to get Chinese support to resume a campaign of maximum pressure, Shin observed. One suggestion was to invite Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo-jong, to the US to experience Western culture, and demonstrate why North Korea needs to become a normal, open state.

Ambassador Kathleen Stephens contended that a good short-term, realistic goal is focusing on risk reduction. Efforts to reduce risk include accounting for fissile material to make sure it doesn't cross borders, creating a US-North Korean hotline, or employing confidence building measures like having North Korean observers at US-South Korean military exercises.