

The Korean Peninsula and the U.S. Strategy in the Asia-Pacific

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Interviewees

Kurt Campbell
Chaesung Chun

Summary

Dr. Kurt Campbell, the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs and the key architect of ‘the U.S. pivot to Asia’ strategy was interviewed by Dr. Chaesung Chun, chair of the Asia Security Initiative Research Center, regarding issues on North Korea and the regional dynamics in East Asia. During the discussion, Dr. Campbell warned the danger of North Korea’s potential for miscalculation and pointed out the need to find ways for dialogue, including close consultation with China. With respect to East Asian regional dynamics, Dr. Campbell suggested that it is a mistaken notion that the rise of China would only induce a rivalry between China and America, thus imposing on other regional members to ‘pick sides.’ In fact, the U.S. would welcome developments toward improved relations with both the U.S. and China, and would also like to see an improvement of China-Japan relations. With respect to the Korean Peninsula, Dr. Campbell asserted that the U.S. commitment in East Asia would continue even after unification has been achieved.

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North Korea’s Strategic Calculations

- Despite the fact that the North Korean regime is inherently unpredictable, we should recognize that their actions, including provocations, are based on delicate calculation.
- The North Korean regime understands that causing a full-scale conflict on the Korean peninsula would necessitate their collapse and therefore it is not in their strategic interest to escalate.
- Even though the North Korean regime would not want to have an escalated conflict, its recent behavior suggests that the possibility for miscalculation is increasing, which makes the situation more dangerous and worrisome.

This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Q&A.

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D
Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu
Seoul 100-786
Republic of Korea

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- Given that North Korea has become increasingly dependent on China, South Korea should continue to pursue dialogue with Beijing and create opportunities to dispel certain myths about what they think the United States or other countries would do in a crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

Regional Dynamics and Future of Unification: U.S.-China Relations in Northeast Asia

- The alliance between the U.S. and South Korea has never been stronger. Nonetheless, the future relationship between a unified Korea and the U.S. will ultimately be up to the Korean people.
- Countries that are the most effective in Asia are the countries which have good relationships with both China and the U.S.—neither Beijing nor Washington expects countries to choose one side at the expense of the other.
- In accordance with its ‘pivot’ or the rebalance strategy, the U.S. commitment in the region would continue, while it is true that we must have the wit and wisdom to find the time and attention to focus on what is going to be the dominant issues in the twenty first century. For the U.S., the Asia-Pacific represents the future and this perspective is being increasingly recognized by the government, congress, and the business community as well.
- For the U.S. to stay out from tensions between South Korea and Japan, or Japan with China runs the risk of alienating its allies and partners in Northeast Asia. Therefore the U.S. should send a strong message that signals its desire for improved South Korea-Japan and China-Japan relations.
- Rising nationalism in Asia will render cooperation much more difficult in the region. Each country, including South Korea, should take note of this concerning trend and seek ways to mitigate its negative outcomes.

Transcript of the Interview (abridged):

North Korea's Strategic Calculations

“North Korea could inadvertently miscalculate, and trigger the type of crisis they seek to avoid. [...] They are finding it more difficult to figure out exactly where that line is.”

Chun: Starting with North Korea, in the last interview with the Wall Street Journal, you said “the North Koreans have been very careful, they know exactly how to walk right up to the wire and not to trigger a crisis”. I think this is a very accurate observation of North Korea's behavior. Can you evaluate how both the South Korean and American governments are doing in terms of deterring North Korean provocations?

Campbell: I think the United States and South Korea, at a fundamental level, have done an outstanding job. We have maintained peace and stability on the peninsula for over forty years. And during that period, South Korea has become one of the most dynamic and innovative countries on the planet, with a robust, thriving democracy and civil society, whereas North Korea has become one of the most brutal, backward, retributive states on the international scene. At the same time, North Korea plays a weak hand very effectively: it prods, it pokes, it creates specific crises in a way to understate and underscore their power, and it attempts to get the United States and South Korea to feel impotent about North Korea's power. And they've done it again and again. The worry is that, that approach requires very delicate calculation and design of provocation. My worry is that in South Korea there is a growing sense, in the armed forces and elsewhere, that if they're tested, they're going to respond. And so, North Korea could inadvertently miscalculate, and trigger the type of crisis they seek to avoid. I think North Korea knows fundamentally that if a conflict is started on the peninsula under any circumstances, their regime would disappear. So it's not in their strategic interests to take it over the line. But at the same time, they are finding it more difficult to figure out exactly where that line is.

Chun: Even though we have some hopes for unification, if North Korea under Kim Jong-un is able to sustain itself for some time then it's very hard for us to bypass North Korea. Especially as you said we need to put more pressure and give them some incentives towards denuclearization, reform and opening. So how do you expect short term or mid-term resilience of North Korea's regime, and what are the basic guidelines?

Campbell: In truth, it would be difficult to describe how many times, I have been wrong about North Korea. Much of that has to do with the survivability of the regime. I thought in the 1990's, during the famines, that there was a very real chance that North Korea would go through instability, and of course it pulled through. This is really hard to predict. The nature of the North Korea regime is that it is inherently unpredictable, rather fragile, and dealing with internal forces that we cannot fully understand. So I would be of the view that we should find ways to talk with North Korea, but also recognize that they are facing enormous internal pressures with increasingly much of their wherewithal coming from China.

Chun: How can we engage China in dealing with North Korea?

Campbell: It is important that we try. I think South Korea should try to have some independent dialogue with China. The Chinese are remarkably demurring when it comes to contemplating next steps on the Korean peninsula, but I'm convinced that if we talk they will listen thereby dispelling some myths about what they think the United States or other countries would do in a crisis.

Regional Dynamics and Future of Unification: U.S.-China Relations in Northeast Asia

“It is very clear that neither the United States nor China is expecting – or asking – countries to choose one or the other’. And I think sustaining relationships with both is in the best interests of countries in Asia as a whole.”

Chun: These days, Chinese scholars or officials say to the South Koreans: “After reunification, what are you going to do? Are you going to maintain the alliance with the United States?” Do you have any idea of the relation a unified Korea would have with the United States? The majority here thinks that the alliance is important.

Campbell: Not just the majority, but the strong majority. In fact, you could make an argument that the U.S.-South Korean relationship has never been stronger. Nonetheless, ultimately this is up to the Korean people. We are not going to force alliance or engagement on anyone. We believe that the alliance continues to serve the interests of both nations, and more importantly the region as a whole. I can imagine a situation where we have a range of engagement at various different levels, but I do not believe that the absence of dialogue is in our best interest. So I like your overall approach, I think it is the right way to think about it, and I think most people who I work with, who follow those issues, would say the same thing.

Chun: As a practitioner and a strategist, do you think some dialogue among the U.S., China, and South Korea could be possible, specifically on the issue of the future relationship?

Campbell: I would like to see a number of minilateral interactions, such as the United States, South Korea, and China having some discussions. I think that could be very valuable. Frankly, I would like to see the United States, China, and Japan. We have found it difficult to get China interested in those kinds of formats, and we are not completely sure why. Part of it could be a Chinese ambivalence with respect to anything other than bilateral interactions, or that it wouldn't serve any Chinese strategic interests, but it's clear to me that it is important.

Chun: And in that regard, we welcome the movement by China, the United States last year about establishing so-called “New Type of Major Power Relationship”. Our North Korea policy and inter-Korea relations is quite dependent upon the relationship between the U.S. and China, so hasty theorists may think that there is an inevitability of clash which leads us to an inevitability of choice. I think it is wrong. There are a lot of complex, multilayered relationships, and the North Korean nuclear issue is only one of them. How do you evaluate that term “new type of major power relationship” and how important would China be in terms of the future U.S. foreign policy?

Campbell: Well, let me first say that the countries that are the most effective in Asia are the countries which have good relationship with both China and the United States. It is very clear that neither the United States nor China is expecting – or asking – countries to choose ‘one or the other’. And I think sustaining relationships with both is in the best interests of countries in Asia as a whole. The Chinese are very fond of bullet and boards of banners, such as ‘great power relationships’. I do not in, a kneejerk way, reject these different frameworks. I understand why they are done. My worry is that they obscure the hard work that needs to be done around some specific issues. It is one thing to say ‘new great power relationship’, but what we need is a deep dialogue between the United States and China on a whole range of issues: military issues, cyber issues; etc., so that we are not surprised when the Chinese government takes a different perspective than we anticipated.

Chun: How do you think the Asia pivot strategy will continue?

Campbell: I think there is a broad recognition that it is in the strategic best interests of the United States. There is a tension between these urgent, as well as extremely difficult tasks in the Middle East and South Asia for the U.S., and with the rising American position in Asia. But we must have the wit and wisdom to find the time and attention to focus on what is going to be the dominant issues in the twenty first century. And I believe it is not just the United States government but the business community and the congress as well. There is a growing recognition that this is where our future lies. I do not think we do enough to communicate that to our friends in the region, but it is still nevertheless the case.

Chun: Under that framework, what I am interested in is the change in hub and spoke structure. Inter-spokes relations, such as South Korea and Japan are really important and you said that your “particular view is that the United States should take a leading role in facilitating a closer relationship between Japan and Korea”. Do you have any specific measures in mind?

Campbell: The dominant wisdom has always been the United States should stay out; for fear that we would alienate one or the other. But I think the real issue by staying out, is that now we are facing the risk of alienating both. We need to send a strong message. An idea could be a senior diplomat who would shuttle between the two countries over a period of time, just listening. I think that simple tool could send the message that the United States is very committed to this relationship. We would not have to say much. Ultimately, I would like to see the relationship improve, and as a consequence, a rebuilding relationship between Japan and China. It is not clear, as we talked about, whether China has decided to basically write off Abe, we just do not know. We will have to test that going forward. But I do believe that kind of diplomacy is in our best interest.

Chun: A last, short question: Having said all this, do you have any recommendations for the Korean government or people, about our foreign policy in the future?

Campbell: Well, first, let me say that I am really confident about South Korea. I believe that this new concept of unification is smart; I think South Korea prepares well and has done its homework on this set of issues. My biggest advice is: be clear and firm with Chinese friends, and recognize the role they play with respect to North Korea. I think that what

you need to understand is that we are dealing with a series of rising nationalisms in Asia that will make it much more difficult going forward. And those nationalisms reside not just in Japan, China, and Myanmar, but they lie in South Korea as well. And I think that is going to be an animating feature of the diplomacy going forward. ■

About the Interviewees

Kurt Campbell

Kurt M. Campbell is Chairman and CEO of The Asia Group, Chairman of CNAS and a Director for Standard Chartered Bank. From 2009-2013, he was Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Dr. Campbell has recently been awarded the Gwanghwa Medal by the Republic of Korea for his contributions to the U.S.-South Korea bilateral alliance.

Chaesung Chun

Chaesung Chun is the Chair of the Asia Security Initiative Research Center at East Asia Institute. He is also professor at the department of political science and international relations at Seoul National University.