

Breaking the Stalemate: U.S.-North Korea Relations and South Korea's *trustpolitik*

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Interviewee

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Summary

Is there a way to break the stalemate with North Korea? Mr. Frank Jannuzi, President and CEO of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, offers an assessment of the current U.S.-North Korea relations, focusing on the question of how to solve the challenges of the North Korean nuclear development. Despite the difficulties in persuading North Korea to denuclearize, Mr. Jannuzi emphasizes the need for the international community to shape the environment towards dialogue and negotiation. The frustration by the U.S. comes from the fact that past efforts, including the Six Party Talks and the Leap Day agreement, failed to achieve its goal and North Korea continues to develop its nuclear program alongside its ballistic missile technology. Given the stalemate, however, Mr. Jannuzi recognizes South Korea's *trustpolitik* as a plausible way to foster a regional engagement strategy that is similar to Europe's Helsinki Process. Finally, Mr. Jannuzi points out that the current relationship between South and North Korea remains at the early stage of trust-building, by which the two needs to stop doing harm to each other. He argues that the spirit of reconciliation must continue to grow, especially if the younger generations are to live in the Korean Peninsula marked by cooperation and common interest.

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U.S. North Korea Policy and North Korean Denuclearization

- North Korea's nuclear ambition is central to the survival of their government, and it will take much more effort than the currently suspended Six Party Talks or sanctions to untangle this relationship.

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

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- The U.S. should always pursue the goal that seeks complete eradication of North Korea's nuclear weapons capacity. However, near term concerns are more likely to be focused on non-proliferation, especially after the discovery of North Korea's proliferation activities in Syria.
- The Six Party Talks has been effective in a sense that it offered "external guarantors" to strengthen negotiated outcomes. Currently, however, the U.S. has very little expectation for North Korea to return to the negotiation table, which needs to take place under the right circumstances.
- Americans felt betrayed by North Korea following the breakdown of the Lead Day agreement in 2012. Nevertheless, frustrations in diplomacy should not be used to deter the U.S. from reengaging.

South Korea's *Trustpolitik*

- Based on President Park's *trustpolitik*, South Korea may be able to create some political space for the Obama administration to in terms of leading the efforts to achieve denuclearization vis-à-vis North Korea. Given that the U.S. government is currently occupied elsewhere and frustrated with North Korea's obduracy, Seoul may be able to provide new ideas that can persuade other countries, including the U.S., to support and follow.
- The Helsinki Process in Europe was a process of engagement predicated on mutual respect across multiple dimensions from security to economy, and from human rights to people-to-people contact. South Korea's Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) shares a similar vision with this process and it may as well lead to greater engagement with North Korea.
- A Helsinki Process in Northeast Asia, as NAPCI may envision, will deal with smaller and easier issues that are least controversial to build a foundation for countries to engage in harder issues. In other words, none of it will be designed to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue by itself but to shape the environment that is more likely to bring about negotiations on such topics.
- As a multilateral engagement process, a Helsinki Process in Northeast Asia will broaden the scope of players in terms of dealing with North Korea. There are many other countries aside from the members of the Six Party Talks that take interest in the future of Northeast Asia, and this can also be advantageous for North Korea since it opens up the possibility of having more trusted, friendly or neutral countries to join.
- Currently, inter-Korean relations are at the stage where both sides need to stop doing harm against each other. Once this is established, both can deepen mutual understanding and finally engage in meaningful rapprochement. All parties should recognize that it is in their interest to have younger generations to live in an environment of cooperation and common interest, not hostility and division.

Transcript of the Interview (abridged):

U.S. North Korea Policy and North Korean Denuclearization

“You have an urgent requirement to deal with North Korea not because we trust them but because we do not trust them. We do not trust their intentions, and the only way to build trust is by taking small steps as President Park said: step by step, making promises that are achievable, making commitments that are doable, and then judging by performance.”

Question: How do you assess North Korea’s strategy with respect to nuclear weapons? Would Pyongyang ever be able to abandon its nuclear program?

Jannuzi: After more than twenty years of dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue, we have to accept that North Korea’s nuclear ambition is central to the survival of their government. They have invested not just a lot of energy and time, but they have really put a lot of their national character into this program. I think that they believe it’s their ultimate trump card. It is their ultimate guarantee of survival. So they are not going to give it up easily, and they would only trade it for something of equal value. It is hard to imagine anything of equal value, other than the kinds of security assurances and economic prosperity that might provide an alternative pathway for their survival. So, I think we have to begin with the realization that their nuclear program is integral to the whole survival of the Kim family dynasty and it’s not just something that they are going to trade away lightly.

Q: Under which circumstances do you see North Korea considering the possibility of giving up its nuclear program?

Jannuzi: I do believe they are still circumstances under which North Korea might be willing to give up their nuclear weapons capacity. But I do not believe that we can ever achieve a denuclearized North Korea, if you mean giving up all of their nuclear potential. But in terms of fissile materials and weapons, I think there are circumstances under which they might give it up, but it would long come at the end of a very long road, at a time of normalization with relations with the United States and South Korea. Even then, I think it is unlikely they would give it up, but I think you could imagine a North Korea in a similar position to Iran, with a nuclear capacity which is latent but not fully realized.

Q: North Korea’s nuclear issue is often compared to the case of Iran, a country that also seems to have its own nuclear ambitions but continues to negotiate with the P5+1 countries for a comprehensive agreement. Like North Korea, Iran is subject to heavy economic sanctions but the difference between the two seems to be in their responsiveness to outside pressure. If so, what would you consider as similarities or dissimilarities between the case of Iran and North Korea? Are sanctions an effective tool against Pyongyang?

Jannuzi: One of the real challenges for the international community in dealing with North Korea is that because their economy is so small, and they have such a very tiny legitimate economy, our sources of leverage on North Korea are very few. When Iran was sanctioned by the international community, they paid a heavy economic price. Iran is also a

country with a democratic system. A lot of people do not realize this, but even though it is in some ways an oligarchy, the people of Iran vote, they express themselves through a political system, and they are able to bring pressure onto their political leadership. In North Korea, that does not exist either. So when you sanction North Korea, the people who are suffering have no mechanism to communicate that suffering to the leadership and try to convince them to change course. So, this makes sanctions a tool to be used with a certain amount of skepticism when we talk about North Korea. I think we can use sanction to get their attention, but we probably cannot use sanctions to compel them to do what we want. If we have their attention, the next thing we have to do is we have to talk to them. There is no point in having sanctions for twenty years without dialogue.

Q: What is the current state of U.S. policy toward North Korea's nuclear program? Is there any possibility that Washington would be willing to engage in greater diplomatic effort vis-à-vis Pyongyang?

Jannuzi: In my experience, senior U.S. leaders like to work on problems that are solvable, and the North Korea problem is a discouraging one. People have been working on it for a long time with many different approaches, but nothing has worked. So I think many senior leaders in America are fatigued. I think other members of the Six Party talks are frustrated by the failure of the talks. In order for the United States to engage in a serious diplomatic effort, I think the leadership of the United States will have to be convinced either that the risks are growing greatly on the Korean Peninsula and that we must do something; or that something has changed in North Korea, and that this time negotiations might work. That is why the Obama administration has set the bar so high for the return of the Six Party Talks, they are waiting for a signal from North Korea that this time it is serious about abandoning their nuclear weapons potential and capabilities. Unfortunately I think that the United States would have to wait for a very long time to get such a signal. Also the patience of the United States should not become another name for indifference to the situation on the Korean peninsula.

Q: In between denuclearization and non-proliferation, which would be the more desirable policy goal for the U.S. and why?

Jannuzi: In a technical sense, proliferation is the spread of the nuclear technology, and denuclearizing North Korea would involve dismantling and eradicating their entire nuclear capability. There has been a long debate, in the United States, about what poses the bigger threat: is it the threat that North Korea will export fissile material or nuclear technology to a third party, maybe even a terrorist organization? Or does North Korea's own possession of nuclear weapons is a serious threat to the United States and its allies? I think most American strategists and leaders are not satisfied with only preventing North Korea from spreading its nuclear technology. That may be our near term concern, but even if we were successful in putting in place a quarantine around North Korea that prevented them from ever exporting nuclear technology, as long as North Korea possesses nuclear weapons, it is a threat to our interests. It is a threat to the people of South Korea and other neighbors of North Korea. So I think the goal has to be completely eradicating North Korea's nuclear weapons capacity. However, if you ask me what the higher probability threat is right now, I am more concerned about the export. And of course, we have a track record; we know that North Korea exported nuclear technology to Syria. Imagine how bad the Syrian conflict might be now, if Syria possesses nuclear weapons. We need to deal with both threats, but we cannot pretend that only preventing North Korea from proliferating is enough.

Q: Moving on to the Six Party Talks, what is your assessment over this process, especially given its track record so far? Do you think there is value in this type of multilateral approach?

Jannuzi: Well, let me say something a little controversial. I think the Six Party Talks have never really been a framework that was meant to be multilateral. It is a multilateral opportunity for bilateral conversations—Conversations between North Korea and South Korea, between North Korea and the United States, between China and the United States. A six-sided table with five languages being spoken is a very difficult negotiating table. I think the Six Party Talks are useful mostly because whenever there could be an agreement between North Korea and, principally, the United States or South Korea could be reached we need external guarantors of that agreement. The real value of the Six Party Talks is that you have China, Russia, and Japan who are available both to provide resources but also to hold the other parties accountable for fulfilling their commitments. But the crux of this conflict is not something that is going to be resolved around a six sided table. It is going to be resolved in direct negotiations between North and South, and between North Korea and the United States. We have had no Six Party Talks for over five, six years, and I think we need to start somewhere. We probably need to start with an intensified diplomacy between the North and the South, and a resumption of diplomacy between the United States and North Korea.

Q: Do you think the Six Party Talks will resume any time soon? Why or why not?

Jannuzi: I think much will depend on North Korea's attitude. I do not believe the Obama administration will abandon its principled position that North Korea has to demonstrate in a concrete way its commitment to denuclearization in order to trigger serious negotiations. So I think the United States believes that the ball is in North Korea's court. Will North Korea make that decision? Probably not. That is, unless the United States and other parties do something to shape the negotiating environment. They can shape the negotiating environment by additional sanctions, by humanitarian outreach or other signs of goodwill, through high level secret diplomacy to try to communicate messages. But one way or the other, until North Korea does that, I do not think you are going to see a resumption of the talks.

Q: If the Six Party Talks were to resume at some point, under what kind of circumstances should it take place?

Jannuzi: Obviously, I cannot speak for the Obama administration on this. I think what the United States are looking for is that prior to the resumption of Six Party dialogue, North Korea needs to take some concrete steps, and among those would include freezing activities at Yongbyon, suspending uranium enrichment, bringing that under some sort of international monitoring by the IAEA or other body, suspending missile testing and nuclear testing for the duration of the talks. These are certain core minimal expectations that the United States believes the North must fulfill to demonstrate a very sincere commitment to the eventual goal of denuclearization. I think that the United States would be prepared to have some flexibility on the timing of these various steps. But the core of it is that the United States is not prepared to negotiate while the North is holding a gun pointed at the U.S. I think from the North Korean perspective, they may have a similar request. They may expect the United States to suspend military exercises or to promise not to impose any new sanctions or lift some sanctions when the talks resume. I have no reason to believe that the Obama administration would be completely inflexible; I mean they would have some flexibility on such conditions. One of the difficulties here, is that North Korea is the weaker power, and preconditions of any kind, any kind, are deeply offensive

to Pyongyang. They feel the coercion of that. Sometimes I wish the U.S. side would find other words to express their needs, because, in my experience dealing with North Korea, they hate preconditions.

Q: For the U.S., part of the frustration with North Korea seems to come from the failed Leap Day agreement back in 2012. What were the lessons learned, and how should we proceed onwards?

Jannuzi: I think the real tragedy of the Leap Day “non-agreement” is that there was never an agreement. Since there was never really an agreement, but perhaps the United States thought there was one, when the North Koreans made clear their determination to proceed with what they called a satellite test, the United States felt betrayed. Disappointments in diplomacy are common but a feeling of betrayal is a little bit rarer. And truly, the Americans felt betrayed. They felt that the North Koreans had dishonored themselves by breaking an agreement, which as far as I can tell, was never made. So frustrations in diplomacy should not be used to deter the United States from reengaging. John Kennedy said in his inaugural address that the United States should never negotiate out of fear, but it should never fear to negotiate. The United States is a strong, dominant, military, and economic power in the world. Surely we can choose to reengage with North Korea—one of the weakest, smallest countries on the planet without fear. And we can negotiate not out of fear, but out of the pursuit of our own national interests. If we trusted them, we would not have the need for such negotiations. You have an urgent requirement to deal with North Korea not because we trust them but because we do not trust them. We do not trust their intentions, and the only way to build trust is by taking small steps as President Park said: step by step, making promises that are achievable, making commitments that are doable, and then judging by performance.

South Korea's *Trustpolitik*

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Q: In your opinion, what is South Korea's role in terms of resolving the North Korean nuclear issue? Where does President Park Geun-hye's *trustpolitik* fit into this long-standing effort?

Jannuzi: I think South Korea, through its *trustpolitik* [and] through the Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiatives is doing what I am suggesting. I think they are trying to shape the environment. No one believes that agricultural projects or Kaesong, or Mount. Kumgang, or cooperation in public health will solve the North Korea nuclear issue. The hope is that by establishing better channels of communication, by building a little bit of trust in the relationship, you can persuade the North Korean leadership that it is productive for them to sit down at the table and discuss the tough issues. I think that what South Korea is trying to do could create some political space for the Obama administration to follow. At different times, the United States or South Korea has led the efforts to achieve denuclearization. Right now, I believe, it is time for South Korea to lead, because I think the U.S. government is occupied elsewhere, and the Obama administration has reached a level of frustration with the North Korea policy that means that they are unlikely to be the leader with new ideas.

Q: There has been much discussion about starting a so called Helsinki Process in Northeast Asia. For one, South Korea's Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative is known to share some similarities with the original Helsinki Process in terms of background, objectives, and basic approaches. What can we learn from this process and how can it be realized in the context of Northeast Asia?

Jannuzi: I think that many scholars and politicians have been looking for a way to reconfigure the negotiating environment in Northeast Asia for quite some time. The beauty of the Helsinki Process was that it was not designed to dissolve the Soviet Union. It was a process of engagement that was predicated on mutual respect. It was a process of engagement across multiple dimensions, confidence and security building measures on the security side, economic engagement, as well as human rights and people to people. And so, in imagining a Helsinki Process for Northeast Asia, my objective is to try to say to the nations who care about the North Korea nuclear problem: "What can we do to shape the negotiating environment and while we are waiting for the resolution of the really tough nuclear issue, what can we do to improve the lives of the people of North Korea, and to make everyone in the region feel more secure?"

The Helsinki Process should be comprehensive, across multiple dimensions. It could start with people to people initiatives. Family reunification is a piece of this, but by no means the only part. Cultural exchanges, sports exchanges, symphony visits to New York by the Pyongyang symphony, trying to break the ice. It should include an economic component, because normal economic relations are not sanctioned with North Korea.

In terms of the timing and sequencing of the Helsinki Process, I think you start with the easy stuff, with the least controversial, the most mundane, and then you build to the harder things which would include on the security side looking at conventional military confidence building measures. You can look at a West Sea security agreement, to try to reduce the tensions over the fishing grounds there. You can look to agreements in regard to military exercises that both sides hold in terms of the scale and the scope of those exercises as well as the potential even to have observers attend those exercises. None of it would be designed to resolve the nuclear issue by itself. You are talking about a process to build trust and confidence. I think it is very consistent with what President Park has outlined. It is one of the reasons I was excited when I saw the similarities between what she was suggesting with her Seoul Process and the Helsinki Process. I am sure that she was herself inspired in part by the Helsinki experience.

Would North Korea go for it? I am not sure. The culmination of the Helsinki Process was the dissolution of the Soviet Union. I am sure there are some in North Korea who would worry that this is some kind of poisoned pill. But it does not have to be. The thing about the Helsinki Process is that it is multilateral and the advantage there is that there are a lot of other players that do take an interest in the future of Northeast Asia: the Europeans, the Mongolians, Asian Partners like Australia, New Zealand, Singapore.

None of them have a role to play right now with the Six Party Talks. But all of them could play a role as part of the Helsinki Process. And some of them, like Mongolia or Vietnam, are reasonably well trusted by North Korea and so this would provide a mechanism through which they could contribute to peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Sometimes, it is a little harder to engage with your adversary than it is to engage with a neutral party or a friend. North Korea has fraternal good relations with Mongolia, but Mongolia also has good ties to South Korea. So you can imagine the Mongolians providing tutelage, if you will or lessons learned to the North Korean government about how to engage in the international system. So I think it broadens the players.

Q: What advice could you offer to the South Korean government in dealing with North Korea?

Jannuzi: I think that the South Korea government should be thinking about the nation's youth as it imagines how to approach North Korea. Reconciliation begins when you stop doing harm to one another. The first step is to stop doing harm. The next step is to try to deepen mutual understanding. And the third step is when you try to atone for mistakes of the past and build a future together. And right now, we are unfortunately still at the first step: "Stop doing harm." And it is a reciprocal obligation, so the North Korean need to stop harm to the South Korean people, whether its Yeonpyeong-do or the Cheonan or provocative actions like missile test and nuclear test. South Korean people need to approach North Korea with a spirit of reconciliation one that says "We recognize that we are one people, and so we do not want to do harm to our brothers and sisters in the North." I think the South Korean government has very much tried to be governed by this sense of the process of reconciliation.

My only advice to the government would be to be persistent in its pursuit of peace and to understand that the only path forward that will enable the young people of North Korea and South Korea to one day be united is one in which the governments stop doing things toward each other that are antagonistic and start to build a record of cooperation on mutual interests, step by step. It may take time but that just means that we should start immediately, because the longer we wait, the longer we have to wait for the day of reconciliation and hopefully reunification. That is a very generic advice, but I do think that the leaders of South Korea, the leaders of the United States, and North Korea should be thinking about the youth and what type of world they will grow up in and will it be a peninsula marked by hostility and division or by cooperation and common interest. And hopefully, it will be the later. ■

About the Interviewee

Frank Jannuzi

Frank Jannuzi joined the Mansfield Foundation as President and Chief Executive Officer in April 2014. From 1997-2012, Mr. Jannuzi was Policy Director, East Asian and Pacific Affairs, for the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where he advised Committee Chairmen Joseph Biden and John Kerry on a range of security, political, economic, and human rights issues pertinent to U.S.