

Interview with Christopher Hill

Recommended Citation

"Interview with Christopher Hill", NAPSNet Special Reports, June 09, 2005,
<https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/interview-with-christopher-hill/>

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Special Report 05-48A: June 9th, 2005

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by Cheong Wook Sik

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I. Introduction

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill, interviewed by Cheong Wook Sik, a representative of the Civil Network for a Peaceful Korea (CNPk), stated: "I think we made it very clear that we are prepared to give all kinds of security assurances [to the DPRK]. And we are willing to do those in the context of multilateral security -- in guarantees. If the North Koreans want something else, then they should sit at the table and tell us."

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II. Interview by Cheong Wook Sik

- "Interview with Christopher Hill"
by Cheong Wook Sik

Cheong Wooksik : Let me start with the question about U.S. intentions toward North Korea. Secretary Rice said that the U.S. regards North Korea as a sovereign state. I think it is a very important message. Does this mean that your government has a willingness to coexist with North Korea peacefully?

Christopher R. Hill: Yes. The secretary made it very clear that of course we don't question North Korea's status as a sovereign state and we certainly have no intention of attacking North Korea or anything like that. And that we are prepared to sit down with them and work out an agreement in the six-party process. But the North Koreans have instead chosen to go through her testimony and find three words they did not like -- outpost of tyranny -- and have chosen to be offended by those three words. And one has to really ask the question, are they serious about negotiating an end to their weapons programs and doing what we all want, which is to have a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula?

But I think the United States has to express its willingness to North Korea for something like peaceful co-existence. Is this possible?

Well, we have expressed our willingness but the problem is the North Koreans want to give us words that we must then repeat to them. What the North Koreans are trying to do is turn this into a sort of circus act ... In short, it is not a serious effort on their part. We will choose our own words, we will say things in the way we want to say them. We won't be dictated to by the North Koreans on that. So I think the secretary has made very clear our good intentions.

Good intentions?

Yes!

No hostile intent to the North Koreans?

Again, you are using the North Korean expression. We can choose our own words. We don't need to choose the words that someone else chooses for us. We don't ask other people. We don't tell other people what to say. They shouldn't tell us what to say.

As you know very well, the six-party talks have not been held for a long time. As a professional negotiator, do you have any plan or willingness to visit Pyongyang and persuade the North Korean leaders to return to the six-party talks? Is this possible?

Well, they should know -- and they do know -- that if they come to the six-party process, they will find a U.S. delegation -- that will be under me -- that will be prepared to reach an agreement. But I don't think they want to come back to the talks because I don't think they are prepared to reach an agreement. I really wish this were a simple matter of our saying some magic words to them, or that we will do something, make some gesture, and then everything will be okay. But I don't think it is such a simple matter for them. I think the problem is they simply have not made the decision to do away with these weapons. And I might add that these weapons don't threaten the U.S. We can take care of ourselves. These weapons are designed as threat makers.

What about the New York channel? Was there any contact with North Korea recently?

Oh, not recently. The last time was last December. And we had heard that the North Koreans were waiting for the results of the American elections in November. So after the result came and there

was no need to wait any more for the results, we wanted to make clear to them that in fact we were prepared -- we're ready -- we want to solve this through the six-party dialogue. So we went there and in an effort of good will, really, to make sure that they knew that was our position.

Unfortunately, though, they chose to answer us through the media. They announced their answer to the media and unfortunately they made it very clear that they weren't interested in such a dialogue. So you asked me as a negotiator how I feel, and I feel kind of sad that they have no interest apparently in dialogue on this. They only want to communicate with us by statements from Pyongyang, which usually include very hostile statements.

I understand and I agree with you, but there are some different connotations between North Korean hostile statements and the U.S. hostile statements and I think it is not helpful to each other. What will happen to it all?

We want to solve this problem. But every time they make a statement, it's as if they want the problem to get worse. Certainly the February 10th statement was an effort to make the problem worse. The March 31st statement was an effort to make the problem worse -- so I have to assume they don't want to solve it.

There are media reports that North Korea seems to be preparing for a nuclear test. Are there any concrete signs of this?

Well, I think you have to be careful with "concrete information" like that. No one can say that they have concrete information on that. So the question of whether they are going to test -- you should probably ask Kim Jong Il because he probably knows. What we see is a pattern of escalating the problem and a pattern of making the problem worse. And so if you extrapolate from how they're doing that, we see that they might in fact be planning to test, but I cannot tell you that I know for sure.

As you have said before, the United States has no intention to attack or invade North Korea...

That's right. That's right

Will this be the case in the future as well?

Yes, I mean the future is a long time, obviously (laughter). But we want to solve this problem through dialogue and negotiation. We made it very clear that we want to solve this together with our partners. You know, this is not a bilateral matter. This is not about the U.S. feeling threatened by North Korea. This is a matter involving many different states and the idea that South Korea should sit like some expectant father waiting for the delivery of this baby is really, you know, not what South Korea is today. South Korea is the world's tenth largest economy and deserves to have a place at the table.

If the U.S. has no intention of attacking or invading North Korea, why doesn't the Bush administration sign a non-aggression pact or a peace treaty with North Korea?

I think in the context of the six-party process, we could reach such a multilateral agreement.

Is there any possibility of a legally binding treaty with North Korea?

You are talking about some sort of bilateral agreement requiring Senate ratification. That's a pretty long and complicated process...

But I think what is important is the willingness of the Bush Administration...

I think we made it very clear that we are prepared to give all kinds of security assurances. And we are willing to do those in the context of multilateral security -- in guarantees. If the North Koreans want something else, then they should sit at the table and tell us. That is why we have a table. That is why we have chairs. That is why we have a process.

So, for example, in June last year, we laid out several elements that we would like to see included in an agreement. One of them is the security guarantees. Now if the North Koreans don't feel they're adequate, if they feel that they somehow are not safeguarded in international law or some sort of international instrument, you should sit down and tell us. Show us what they want to see. That is what a negotiation is. Anybody who has bought a piece of fruit in a market knows how to negotiate. So it is unclear why they do not want to come -- because they feel these are inadequate guarantees? That is why they won't come to the table? In fact, that is a reason why they should come to the table.

So you mean that if North Korea returns to the six-party talks, can the U.S. government discuss with North Korea about replacing the armistice treaty with a peace treaty?

We can discuss lots of things. Sure.

The former assistant secretary, Mr. Kelly, said that a peace treaty with North Korea is only possible after North Korea dismantles its nuclear program...

Clearly, we are not going to reach some kind of peace treaty with a country that is illegally possessing nuclear weapons. Clearly we are not going to do that. So Mr. Kelly is absolutely right on that. But you're also getting into the details of the negotiation. The fact that I am talking to OhmyNews about the details of the negotiation and not talking to the North Korean government should tell you something. They should sit down and say: we looked at your elements and we like this, and we don't like that, and we want you to explain this -- that is a normal negotiation. Anyone who has bought anything in a market knows how to do that. So the idea they stay out of the negotiations because they are not clear on these elements -- that does not make sense to me.

You have emphasized the importance of negotiation...

Absolutely!

And you said that the United States has a willingness to make some revision of the former proposal in the third round of the six-party talks, if the next process is to be resumed. Is this still valid?

Sure, we put down some elements. We have asked them to respond to our elements. We will then respond to their response. They would then respond to our response to their response and that is called a negotiation. We are prepared to sit down to do that. Now, at the end of this process, we need a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. We are not prepared to negotiate on the basis that North Korea could retain nuclear weapons. We are not prepared to do that. This is a violation of the NPT, the Non-Proliferation Treaty. We cannot have a situation where nuclear weapons have been introduced in the Korean Peninsula. So at the end of this process, we need to negotiate an agreement that makes clear: no nukes on the Korean Peninsula. How we do that, how we sequence the elements of this? For example, the North Koreans don't want to be doing something that is an action and only receive words in response. Okay, we can work on actions for actions and words for words, we can work on this. But we cannot do it through press releases, we need to do it at the table. And they know that.

So it's simultaneous steps. North Korea first gives up nuclear weapons and the United States does something. Is it possible for the Bush administration to accept simultaneous steps with North Korea to resolve the nuclear crisis?

We would have to work out what the sequencing of the steps are. That is part of the negotiating process. And in this negotiation, one cannot expect one side to take actions while the other side takes words. We know that. So we are prepared to look very carefully at what their response to our proposal is and to see if we can reach an agreement. But when you say the North Koreans want this or want that, I have no idea what the North Koreans want because I have never sat at a table listening to their response. We haven't had a negotiation in almost a year. What we have had during this year is a lot of hostile announcements from Pyongyang plus an announcement probably boasting of developing nuclear weapons. So my question is: do they really want a negotiation? I see no sign that they do. Maybe they do, but I don't see that they do.

They ought to come to the six-party talks -- they can be as rude as they want -- and they often are rude -- but they've got to sit there and tell us what they want. I don't know what they want. I have been in this job as a six-party coordinator since February, and they refused to come to the talks so I cannot help them with what their position is because I don't know what they want.

Many Korean experts feel that the Bush administration has raised the bar...

Really?

There are many things that North Korea wants. For example, lifting the economic sanctions, removal from the list of nations supporting terrorism and normalizing relations with the United States and so on. However, the Bush administration has raised the bar, like if the nuclear issue is resolved, then the human rights issues should be resolved and then missile issue should be resolved and so on... Then the Bush administration will consider the normalization of its relationship with North Korea -- after these issues are resolved.

You are describing negotiations by press releases. You're describing negotiations that take place in press interviews. I am not prepared, at this point, to say what the result would be of an interactive negotiating process. Obviously the North Koreans have some issues they want to raise with us and we have some issues we want to raise with them. It's an interactive process, so ultimately if they are prepared to sit down on the basis that the last step of the process that involves the clear getting rid of nuclear weapon programs -- because we are not interested in the process of reducing their weapons, we are not interested to list them as a country that is threatening their neighbors with nuclear weapons -- if they are prepared to deal with this, we can work out an agreement. I mean, the way that agreements normally work is that nothing is agreed unless everything is agreed. And you will have a sequencing of issues. So they need to tell us what they need in an agreement. They know what we need, we need a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula -- they already know that -- so they need to respond to our proposal and then let us know. It makes no sense for them to stay out of the talks. The only logic of staying out of the talks is if they don't want to do away with their nuclear weapons. That is the only logic.

Many Korean people also hope that there will be no nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. I think it is a common dream.

But we can't have a dream. We have to have a negotiation.

That's right. So, almost a year has passed since the third round of the talks (June 23, 2004). Is there any positive sign that the next six-party talks will be held in the near

future?

Again, the positive sign should continue to be that our side, in fact all five countries, are prepared to sit down in the six-party process. We want the six-party process to succeed. Do we have a positive sign from the North Koreans?

The North Koreans said that if conditions improve, they will return to the talks. I know that North Korea should make more of an effort to resolve the current crisis in the six-party talks. But many people think that the Bush administration also has to be flexible and make some concessions to North Korea.

Look, I am a career diplomat. I've been in the world of diplomacy for 27 years. I welcome the opportunity to sit down and try to find an agreement. And I am a negotiator. That is what I do. For me, it is a very personally disappointing that one side -- in this case North Korea -- does not share my enthusiasm for sitting down at the table and working out an agreement. If they want an agreement, they could sit down with us. Instead they seem to want to look for gestures and other signs that really don't speak to the question of what we are trying to answer. They are looking for all kinds of things whose purpose seems to be to enhance their own self-esteem, to enhance their own image. And frankly, we were talking about a very serious matter. We are talking about nuclear weapons and programs which are very threatening. By their very nature, they are horrific weapons. Thank god they've only been used once in history and we know when they were used in Japan, how awful they are. And here we have North Korea developing these weapons and refusing to come to the table. I've got to tell you, as a negotiator, I find it extremely disappointing .

We have to move to the next question. About the referral of the North Korean issue to the United Nations Security Council, many experts doubt that it will help to resolve the problem since North Korea regards this as a provocation of war. So what do you think about the possibility of bringing the issue to the Security Council and if it fails, what is the next step for the United States?

First of all, I don't know whether this will go to the Security Council. Obviously the other five parties have the right to bring this to the Security Council if we are unable to get North Korea to come to our table and work on this. Frankly speaking, the UN Security Council was created for the purpose of addressing important problems and the development of nuclear weapons by a state -- by North Korea -- definitely meets the definition of a serious problem. Now, for North Korea to say -- again, only through press releases and I don't take them too seriously -- that referring an important problem to the UN Security Council amounts to a definition of war is a statement which, you think about it, is quite extreme. It is very extreme and strange.

I don't want to speculate on where we will go after the six-party talks. I want the six-party talks to succeed. And what I worry about is if we begin talking about next steps -- Security Council, five-party process whatever other issues, other steps there might be -- then we have a tendency of undermining the six-party process and making it even more difficult for the six-party process to succeed. So I would rather focus on the need to get them there.

Now, I have said we cannot wait forever because we sit there, waiting and waiting, while the North Koreans issue press release after press release bragging about making weapons whose purpose would be to incinerate civilians. That is, whose purpose would be to murder, in a mass way, civilians. So, can we really sit around while they do that? I don't think so.

My last question is about the vision of the six-party talks. Not only for dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue, but also dealing with other regional issues. You said that the

six-party talks can be developed into a common framework in Northeast Asia. So what kind of issues can be discussed in the context of the six-party talks?

I think the idea of the six-party talks is that it is a very good platform on which we can begin to build a sense of community in Northeast Asia. And what is discouraging about Northeast Asia today is the lack of such community structures. We see that every problem in Northeast Asia quickly becomes a brutal, bilateral problem. For example, last summer when I arrived in Korea, I heard so much about this Chinese Academy of Science report about the Goguryeo dynasty. And this became a very nasty, bilateral issue between Korea and China. For me it was very disappointing because I remember in the 1980s how sad it was that China and Korea did not have connections. That is, there were no diplomatic relations and if you wanted to fly from Seoul to Beijing, you'd go down to Hong Kong and then to Beijing. I found that very unnatural.

And so, when I heard about the development of Korean and Chinese relations in the 1990s, frankly that made me very happy. So when I got there in the summer of 2004, once again there were these terrible problems. Those sorts of problems -- history or textbooks -- those can be addressed in a sort of a multilateral framework. For example, in Europe you have these multilateral institutions where they'll have some working groups to develop common understandings of history and things like that. I can see there is a real lack of that kind of thing (here).

More recently, the issues between Korea and Japan also should not have immediately gone into a sort of brutal, bilateral dispute. So one can imagine in the future something like the six-party -- it doesn't have to be six, it could be seven, it could be five, who knows -- process that could deal with some common issues, issues of common concern, like trying to arrive at certain definitions of historical developments, for example. Or common concerns about energy resources, common concerns about environment, about crime and trafficking in persons. Issues that go beyond just one nation but involve whole areas of community. And what we have in Northeast Asia is one of the most exciting, vibrant economic areas but, you know, the development of GDP growth is not all there is in life. There are other things. And I think developing regional community is one of them. So I hope that the six-party process can be a sort of protoplasm of an eventual multilateral structure. That is all. But in order to do that we have got to work through this North Korea issue.

Thank you for your comments and I hope your hard work will result in positive way.

I will try very, very hard and I will do everything so that the end of all this I will sleep well because I know that I tried everything. So please give my best regards to all your readers and tell them I miss being back in Korea and I will come again and visit as often as I can. Thank you.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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Nautilus Institute
2342 Shattuck Ave. #300, Berkeley, CA 94704 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org