

KOREA UPDATE AT HOUSE OF COMMONS A RARE AND TIMELY EVENT

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This 'Korea Update' is the inspired idea and the fruit of many months of hard work by Sylvia Park, voluntary events secretary of the Anglo-Korean Society.

It's such a simple idea, yet so fraught with impossible challenges, to bring together four ambassadors at one table to discuss the issues of the moment: British ambassador to the ROK or South Korea, Martin Uden; British ambassador to the DPRK or North Korea, Peter Hughes; ambassador to Britain from the ROK, Chun Yung-woo; and ambassador to Britain from the DPRK, Ja Song-nam. How particularly timely this discussion would be, with the DPRK's controversial intention to launch a satellite into space very much in the news.

Not only is there a 'royal flush' of ambassadors at the dais, but in the audience is Warwick Morris, ambassador to the ROK for many years but now retired, as well as Dr James Hoare who was responsible for setting up the first British embassy in the DPRK only a few years ago, whose credentials for the job, he claims, were that he was the only person in the foreign office who'd ever said he and his wife actually wanted to go to Pyongyang.

[Former ambassador to the ROK Sir Thomas Harris was also present.]

Even the host for evening is quite a find, as Frank Cook MP mentions at the outset that he twice had lunch with Kim Il-sung, Great Leader of the DPRK. Bringing humour to a discussion one might have mistakenly feared would be overly earnest, he reminds us that warmth, hospitality and friendship are Korean traits whatever side of the border you live, as he introduces this special evening, in which the diplomatic representatives from Pyongyang and Seoul are 'willing to sit at the same table in front of the same audience'.

Sadly, Peter Hughes is absent because of a bereavement, but Stephen Lillie, head of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Far East Group, stands in to describe the British embassy's activities in the DPRK, mainly 'very rich discussions' and setting up English-teaching programmes. English is now more popular as a foreign language than Russian and Chinese, perhaps showing the DPRK's desire to engage with the world at large rather than merely the socialist world. Officials from Pyongyang are invited to stay with British families to learn English and dispel some misconceptions about the British way of life. Lillie ends by stating the British position that 'the satellite launch should not go ahead.'

Next to speak is Martin Uden, who first went to the Republic of Korea in 1978 and returned in February last year, witnessing President Lee's 'rollercoaster of a year' since inauguration with student activism and anti-American protests, and the National Assembly at an impasse. Uden, who as a pioneer in 'digital diplomacy' uses a blog to get messages across broadband-connected South Korea, puts the ROK's economic problems into context for us: although its exports have decreased by 25%, this is still lower than Japan; the negative GDP growth predicted is still not as serious as Singapore, a country even more export-dependent; and interest rates have been lowered, but not as far as in the UK. There is optimism.

'There is no question that relations with North Korea have deteriorated,' he continues, adding that the North has not appreciated the move away from the 'sunshine policy' of the previous government to a more hard-nosed approach. The 'missile launch' is being taken seriously, but the mood in Seoul is certainly not one of panic, he says, the public remembering that seemingly threatening behaviour in the past has led to nothing.

The floor is then open for the audience to address specific questions to the two Korean ambassadors.

Ja Song-nam, the ambassador to Britain from the DPRK, a country with one of the worst human rights reputations in the world, surely has one of the toughest jobs imaginable, and hats off to him for agreeing to come along. Is the DPRK opening up to enter the international market? 'The position of our country is to enter the international market,' he says. 'But there are many things to do before we can do that.' He reminds us that the DPRK has diplomatic relations with all countries except the USA and Israel. 'We were the original axis of evil,' he jokes, 'but as you can see, there are no horns on my head.' Such jokes I didn't expect. Ja comes across as warm and thoughtful, although when asked about the objectives of his embassy in the UK, the answers merely reiterate a general mandate to improve exchange and engagement.

When his South Korean counterpart, Chun Yung-woo, is given the chance to speak, he doesn't mince words at all. 'We've been hearing lots of not very delightful announcements from Pyongyang, the foremost being the experimental communications satellite.' What he wants to know is why North Korea is devoting an enormous amount of their scarce resources to a space programme given its economic situation. 'We think their objective is to develop a long-range missile capabilities, since there is no immediate need for a satellite. And long-range missiles are only useful for delivering nuclear warheads.'

The tension is palpable. He adds that this contravenes the Security Council resolution that North Korea suspend all activities in its nuclear programme. 'Everything is possible if you co-operate,' a comment he quite pointedly directs to Ja, but South Korea is not interested in 'unconditional engagement'.

Ja fervently makes notes throughout all this, and responds at some length. Why should a country not be allowed to have a satellite because they are less well off than another country? Because of lack of trade opportunities and natural calamities, North Korea has indeed had problems, but these are temporary. 'If we are left out while others are exploring space, there will be no place left to explore. The satellite launch trajectory is over South Korea so there is no need to worry,' he quips. 'It is true, we have nuclear weapons. But as a deterrent, self-defence. We do not mean to threaten anybody. After the Korean War, we were under constant threat of nuclear strike by the U.S. Technically, we are now at war with the United States – it is not fair for one side to demand the other disarm. We have suggested a peace treaty to the U.S., but this is still unresolved. We have expressed willingness to have missile negotiations with the U.S., which we had with Clinton, but these were broken off after Bush came to power.'

The launch of the missile is quite peaceful, he emphasizes. In response to the supposed violation of the Security Council resolution, he counters that a United Nations resolution states when an independent country feels threatened, it can declare that resolution null and void. He finishes an impassioned speech with a smiling 'I hope to see Mr Chun again...'

As the evening adjourned to an informal reception, I feel incredibly fortunate to have witnessed such a debate, surely the kind of discussion usually open only to politicians and diplomats. The Anglo-Korean Society has shown it can not only be a networking organization, but an important diplomatic forum. In Sylvia Park's twelve years working for the society, this must be one of its finer moments, especially when the North Korean ambassador tells her he has never had an experience like this. Anyone interested in the relations in the divided Korea would have been fascinated by this evening.

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