

 **KEI | KEI University Program Report**

**University of Wisconsin, Madison
Madison, WI
November 3 & 10, 2005**

Overview: Daniel Sneider of the San Jose Mercury and Scott Snyder of the Asia Foundation visited the University of Wisconsin, Madison on Thursday, November 3 and November 10, respectively. Each visited Madison to participate in a four part series during fall 2005 entitled “Understanding (and Misunderstanding) North Korea.” The speaker series is an innovative program for which KEI agreed to fund the transportation of one of the four speakers (John Merrill) on the basis that: 1) all four events would be marketed as joint KEI events; and 2) KEI would select the speakers.

Daniel Sneider Presentation: Mr. Sneider met with a class of 50 undergraduate students enrolled in “Modern Korea: North & South” for a lively and informed discussion on North Korea and media coverage of North Korea. About 55 people—some faculty, some community adults, and mainly students from UW-Madison—attended Sneider’s public talk, entitled: “U.S. Media Discourses on North Korea.”

Presentation: Mr. Sneider began with two examples from his experience covering other countries that helped to illustrate his points about the common distortions from which media coverage of North Korea often suffers. The first was the coverage of the U.S.S.R. around 1989, when collapse was imminent. He said that, when we compare how U.S. media, intelligence, and government perceived the U.S.S.R. before the collapse and the information that has come to light since the collapse, through the release of classified documents, etc., it is clear that we overestimated the strength and degree of threat posed by the Russian military. The United States did not perceive their weaknesses because we were only paying attention to their propaganda touting strength, and our own hysteria and fear. He suggested this notion could hold true with regard to North Korea today. He cautioned against viewing states as “slogans that move” and overlooking internal complexities and conflicts that lurk beneath the facade of unity and strength, i.e., against the danger of overstressing ideology as a motivating and unifying factor and downplaying other motives. While North Korea may not suffer from the same kind of particularistic nationalism as the U.S.S.R., as a stress on its unity, there is probably a great deal more internal complexity in other ways than we are aware of. We understand the complexity of policymaking in our own country, but seem not to think that other countries may be equally complex. We tend to call our nationalism “patriotism” but often view others’ nationalism as problematic.

The second example was from Sneider’s experience covering the death of Emperor Hirohito in Japan during his time as a resident reporter. When President Bush, Sr. and the White House press corps came to cover the funeral, the White House press corps were so obsessed with domestic

scandals and confirmation hearings going on in the United States that they directed all of their inquiries at that topic. Although given passes to the funeral, few reporters attended. They were trapped in a portable bubble of domestic politics that they carried, blinding them to the consideration of larger international issues, except through the lens of what impact the foreign issues might have on the domestic struggles for power between factions in DC. Mr. Sneider called this the “Washington bubble.”

Moving on to discuss these two distortions in relation to North Korea, he said that coverage of North Korea tends to portray it as static, unchanging, and monolithic, while reality indicates that it is dynamic, and divided by factions and differences in ideology. Sneider outlined several crises facing North Korea: first, a crisis of legitimacy —although not a democracy, the regime’s ability to stay in power still ultimately rests on acceptance of its legitimacy by the majority of the populace. Second, a crisis of economic breakdown—the question they face is how to re-energize the economy without losing political control in a way similar to China and Japan. The economic question is the ultimate context for the leadership’s decision making about other issues, including the nuclear issue, exposure to outside influences, and transparency.

He pointed out that coverage of South Korea also suffers from this lack of nuance and from stereotyping, such as the view that many South Koreans are “anti-American.” The reality may be that they are expressing a desire to move away from a dependent client relationship with the United States. While news coverage of North Korea focuses on nuclear issues, coverage of South Korea focuses on anti-Americanism; in reality, most South Koreans are more concerned with domestic issues. They may see nuclear weapons as an obstacle to reunification with North Korea, but not as a security threat that is a source of intense concern.

Most coverage of North Korea in the U.S. media is actually about policy debates in Washington. The people writing it often have not been to Korea or studied it. Mr. Sneider asserted that only two newspaper reporters from English-speaking press are resident in Seoul and speak passable Korean. Coverage of Korea that focuses on domestic policy debates and power struggles tends to dismiss the motivations of governments in North and South Korea as insignificant, seeing them as only tokens in a game being played within the United States and between superpowers in the international arena.

Mr. Sneider gave a fairly detailed account of how the coverage of North Korea has been part of a larger recent pattern of covert war between political factions in Washington via strategic leaks to the press— a battle using the press as a proxy. The Bush administration is deeply divided internally by philosophical/ideological disputes over foreign policy. Reporters become a captive of one camp or the other in these wars and are generally given leaks by one side of the issue, but not the other. This results in their sources being skewed. Reporters have trouble resisting a scoop on a leak, and there is a temptation to save time on fact-checking to get it out first. But, even if one tries to check it out with other sources, sometimes the same piece of distorted intelligence gets passed around within the U.S. bureaucracy and to other allied government’s intelligence services, so the other people you contact may say, “Yes, I heard that too.” And, because people from one camp won’t talk to a reporter who is seen as associated with the other

camp, the reporter doesn't get access to sources with the corrective information they need from the other side to provide a balanced interpretation.

Questions from the audience tended to focus on where to look for balanced perspectives in coverage of North Korea, details about the leaks war, and asking Mr. Sneider how he thought the problems he had outlined with distortions in coverage of North Korea by U.S. media could be remedied.

Scott Snyder Presentation: Mr. Snyder met with a class of 50 undergraduate students and gave a public presentation entitled "The Challenge of a Nuclear North Korea." His talk was sparsely attended as a result of bad weather, but the discussion was engaging and thorough.

Presentation: Mr. Snyder said that this is the second North Korean nuclear crisis, following the first one in 1993–94, which he had studied for his book on North Korean negotiating behavior. The present crisis gives him a sense of *deja vu*. Despite this recent history, the roots of the crisis extend to the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of WWII. Kim Il-Sung cannot have failed to be impressed by the fact that these bombs accomplished what all his efforts as a resistance fighter in Manchuria had not, the surrender of the Japanese state. Then, in the Korean War, the United States considered using nuclear weapons on North Korea, and Kim Il-Sung certainly would have heard about that. Interestingly, the museum of revolutionary history in P'yongyang presents the end of WWII as essentially the following: "Kim Il-Sung issued an edict from Manchuria on Aug. 7, 1945 saying that it was time to really get rid of the Japanese, and then it happened." No mention of the other causes of the fall of Japan is made. These two events might have convinced him that a nation that controls nuclear weapons has the power to control its own fate, and that he was vulnerable to the threat of U.S. nuclear weapons as long as he did not have any. With respect to this issue, *juche* ideology is about being the active subject of history rather than the passive object of history. North Korea desires to be in control of things that will give it the chance to control its own destiny.

He outlined the development of the 1993–94 crisis beginning with the Soviet aid that provided the means to develop laboratories and knowledge of nuclear weapons program. North Korea's pursuit of enriched uranium was another route to weapons. This came to light through the shared intelligence of the United States with Pakistan, which validated the testimony of a North Korean defector who had shared the information but was lacking sufficient evidence. This continues to be an important issue. In the late 1980s, the United Nations encouraged North Korea's accession to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which required inspections by agents from the International Atomic Energy Agency. North Korea underestimated the depth of these inspections, chose to leave the NPT, and found itself under investigation by the United Nations Security Council. The United States initiated bilateral negotiations, leaving out South Korea and upsetting relations between the United States and the ROK. The result of the negotiations was the 1994 Agreed Framework.

In the 1993–94 crisis, the U.S. negotiators had no previous negotiation experience with North Korea to draw from, beyond the armistice negotiations for the Korean War. They tended to view North Korean leadership as erratic, irrational, and unpredictable. Mr. Snyder, however, in his

study found that there was a pattern. He found that they were masters of brinkmanship and threats, and maintaining control of the agenda. They had developed these skills through many years as a smaller weaker state negotiating with bigger stronger states, such as the U.S.S.R, the P.R.C., and now the United States.

In hindsight, the 1994 Agreed Framework made a mistake in deferring one critical step. It left the fuel rods stored in North Korea rather than removing them rapidly. This made possible the later action by North Korea of reprocessing the fuel into weapons-grade plutonium, and the subsequent unraveling of the Agreed Framework. The 1994 agreement tacitly agreed to leave North Korea in the ambiguous state of being able to build weapons without having enough plutonium to test them. Now, having reprocessed some of the rods, they have enough material to meet their needs for deterrence, to conduct tests, and they are presumably continuing to reprocess.

In 2002, the second Bush administration seemed to have learned a few lessons from this previous experience. They did not pursue bilateral negotiations, but rather included all interested parties. They appeared to presume that the North Korean leadership is rational and capable of negotiating a reasonable deal to manage/contain/control the problem.

Prior to the first round of Six Party talks, North Korea made two very strategic moves: last February, North Korea announced that it would not participate in talks, and in May there was a news story that alleging that North Korea might test nuclear weapons. The first statement was a way of asserting that they have other options besides negotiations. As to the second, if North Korea was considering following the Pakistani model and openly testing and acknowledging that they have nuclear weapons, the reaction to their May trial balloon from China and South Korea apparently made them reconsider that option and realize the value of continued ambiguity about their nuclear status, since testing would provoke an unwanted backlash and leave them more isolated. China warned that if North Korea tested then China would allow the U.N. Security Council to debate the issue. Perhaps North Korea hopes to adopt the Israeli model, where it is widely known that they have nuclear weapons, for deterrent effect, but the United States agrees to look the other way. As a result, their status could be left ambiguous so as not to incur the backlash and sanctions a more explicit acknowledgement could bring.

The Six-Party talks have sometimes been more about negotiating with the other countries involved than with North Korea. The Bush administration may have hoped that this would be 5 against 1, but in fact it often works out to involve many different alliances. Korea and China are finding that their interests largely coincide and are cooperating with each other, because both prefer a peaceful and gradual transition rather than risk war or the catastrophic collapse of the North Korean state, with waves of refugees coming over their borders. China is a key player, but South Korea's increased economic strength and its ability to normalize relations with China and Russia, while North Korea remained isolated, have shown its increased power and importance as an actor in Northeast Asia.

Some in the current Bush administration did not want to appear to give legitimacy to the North Korean regime by offering direct negotiations. Instead, they prefer to deal with "the people of North Korea," such as defectors and refugees. The North Korean government, by its threat to

break off negotiations, was also reminding these people that the United States has to negotiate with the regime to solve this issue, since they are the ones who control the nuclear weapons programs.

The Bush administration needs to be able to claim some progress beyond the 1994 Agreed Framework or it will have little success to claim in Asia. This resulted in the call for a peace regime reflected in the recent September announcement from the Six-Party Talks. In this sense, the Six-Party Talks are not just about nuclear issues, they are also about developing some kind of Northeast Asia regional security agreement.

The question and answer session delved more deeply into many issues that were introduced during Mr. Snyder's presentation. Audience members asked questions about North Korea's possible use of the Israeli model for possessing nuclear weapons and the historical relationship between North and South Korea, as well as about the role of certain countries and factions in the current North Korea nuclear negotiations, and prospects for the future.