

“Joint KF-VUB Korea Chair & CSIS Korea Chair Event: Towards Peace in the Korean Peninsula? Assessing a Spring of Summits”

Thursday 14 June (16:30 – 18:00) Korean Cultural Center, Brussels

On Thursday 14 June, the KF-VUB Korea Chair and the CSIS Korea Chair jointly organized a high-level panel entitled “Towards Peace in the Korean Peninsula? Assessing a Spring of Summits.” In the aftermath of the meeting that took place between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, HE Kim Hyung-zhin (ROK Ambassador to Belgium and the EU), Dr. Ramon Pacheco Pardo (KF-VUB Korea Chair, Institute for European Studies, VUB) and Dr. Victor Cha (CSIS Korea Chair) discussed the recent and upcoming development on the Korean Peninsula, including the US-North Korea summit, the two inter-Korean summits and Kim Jong-un’s two visits to China. The event was hosted by the Korean Cultural Center and aimed to build a transatlantic dialogue on Korea and East Asia more broadly in Brussels. The panel discussion was chaired and moderated by Dr. Janka Oertel (Transatlantic Fellow, Asia Program, The German Marshall Fund of the United States).

After welcoming remarks by Dr. Janka Oertel, the three speakers shared their assessment of the diplomatic process that has been taking place on the Korean Peninsula over the last couple of months. Ambassador Kim explained how his government welcomes the result of the Singapore summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un because it promises to help bring down the last legacy of the Cold War in the 21st century. Although many difficulties lie ahead, a first important step towards achieving the complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization (CVID) of the Korean Peninsula was taken. Moreover, Ambassador Kim emphasized the need for continued coordination with all parties involved to implement the reached agreement. He was especially pleased to note that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo went to Seoul and Tokyo immediately after the Singapore summit. A diplomatic process is no undeniably ongoing, and South Korea vows to never go back to the unstable situation as was the case only one year ago.

Dr. Cha shared the Ambassador’s assessment that the situation on the Korean Peninsula has considerably improved over the past weeks. Nonetheless, is it important not to overstate the Singapore meeting’s results, as the joint declaration lacks specifics on what precisely to expect for the future. As a matter of fact, Dr. Cha remains unconvinced that North Korea will ever give up its nuclear weapons. He also admitted being very surprised by Donald Trump’s pledge to halt the so-called war-games, joint military exercises between the US and South Korea, amid negotiations with North Korea. Trump claims to have agreed upon this with Kim Jong-un during their one-on-one, even though they did not write it down. For Dr. Cha, this raises the question of whether other issues might have been settled by the two leaders, outside the framework of the joint declaration. Yes, despite much valid criticism on the US-North agreement, Dr. Cha finds it important to appreciate the fact that the meeting took place at all. As many people never expected the last month’s series of summits to occur, powerful images of the events have the potential to completely alter the narrative surrounding respectively the inter-Korean relationship, and especially the US-North Korea relationship. Dr. Cha concluded by saying that even if many questions remain, overall it was a good meeting between Trump and Kim.

As Europeans have often pushed to include human rights in discussions surrounding the Korean Peninsula, Dr. Oertel asked Dr. Pacheco to share his thoughts on the role of human rights in the US-North Korea negotiations. Dr. Pacheco explained that human rights for now clearly do not occupy the top spot on the US agenda when it comes to dealing with North Korea. Nonetheless, at some point, the issue should be raised. For one, there is a large public interest in the issue of human rights in North Korea, as was clear from the many questions raised about this at the post-summit press conference in Singapore. Moreover, if Kim Jong-un wants to continue ruling for many decades to come, he will have to start considering his population and their rights. For Kim, making concessions on human rights is moreover not very costly, and will be interpreted as a sign of goodwill by the West. For all the reasons mentioned, in combination with continued pressure from Europe, Dr. Pacheco expects human rights to become a big issue in the future.

A second series of questions of Dr. Oertel for the speakers centered on what is next for the Korean Peninsula. Ambassador Kim explained how we should expect many more meetings to come, also at the summit level. He is convinced that many issues were discussed and agreed upon by the leaders of the US and North Korea, even if not everything was included in the agreement. Moreover, the joint statement explicitly commits both parties to hold follow-on negotiations for implementation.

When asked what he would do going forward if he were the head of the US negotiation team, Dr. Cha mentioned three things. First, he would commit North Korea to declare all weapons it currently has, in order for the US negotiators to get a better idea what exactly the talks are about. Second, it would be a good idea to establish liaison offices in Washington and Pyongyang to embed the nuclear negotiations within a broader US-North Korea political dialogue. That way, if the nuclear talks fail, diplomatic contact on other issues can be maintained through these permanent channels of communication. Finally, Dr. Cha recommended to arrange a four-party format including the two Koreas, the US and China to start negotiations about a peace regime, and eventually a peace treaty.

Following up on Dr. Cha's remarks, Dr. Pacheco noted that it would be useful to include the European Union (EU) in any potential future agreement, to prevent it from collapse should one party unilaterally withdraw (as was the case with the Iran-deal). Beyond acting as a diplomatic buffer for the negotiation's outcomes, there are other ways in which the EU can contribute in the future. This is especially the case because the EU is seen as relatively neutral by the North Korean leadership. The EU can provide economic aid and expertise once sanctions are removed. Also, European member states can host track 1,5 and track 2 dialogues as the details of future agreements are being worked out. Finally, given the US predominant focus on denuclearization, the EU has a key role to play in moving the discussion beyond this narrow focus. Human rights could be a place to start.