Crisis Management, 1993-1994

A 38 North Interview

Video posted April 2013

Interviewee: ***Han Sung Joo****, Chairman of the International Policy Studies Institute in Seoul, Korea and former ROK Minister of Foreign Affairs and ambassador to the United States*

Interviewer: ***Mike Chinoy****, Senior Fellow, US-China Institute, University of Southern California*

TRANSCRIPT

Part I: Tensions on the Peninsula 1993-1994

CHINOY: I want to hit the rewind button now and take you back a couple of decades, and ask for your recollections and insights about some of the momentous events that you were involved in as South Korea's foreign minister during the nuclear crises with North Korea in '93, '94, '95, and I want to start with the episode in March 1994, when a North Korean official threatened to turn Seoul into a sea of fire. What was your reaction, how did that play here, what was your sense of what that meant?

HAN: Well even then, North Korea had a habit of blustering, and then coming to the conference table. It was possibly a real expression of their aggressiveness; on the other hand it could've been a sort of covering fire for the ultimate return to the conference table. The guy who made the remark or the threat was somebody that I had known already in the course of the Red Cross talks in that time. Back in 1985, when I participated in North and South Korean talks, Red Cross talks at that time. So I knew even though he was not the most gentle guy, he was personally not such an aggressive guy who was clearly some kind of a strategy or tactical move on his part, on North Korea's part. But it was also meant to intimidate, it was also meant to discredit the South Korean government as well as the United States. They wanted to show that, see, you guys can't do anything about what we do, even when we go way out to be threatening.

CHINOY: I'm wondering, with the benefit of hindsight, how close do you think we got to the possibility of some kind of armed conflict in that spring, early summer?

HAN: Well, certainly we cannot rule out that an armed conflict could have taken place. But at that time I was not losing sleep over that possibility. Actually in June, this is I think more than an anecdote, but I did go to China. I met their key people including the foreign minister and the vice minister who was in charge of Asian affairs, who later became foreign minister. I told them we have the case at the United Nations, at the Security Council; if China did not want to be in this position of having to decide whether they would veto the sanctions decision, by the Security Council or not, the only way to avoid that is for China to tell North Korea that North Korea could not count on Chinese veto. And after many things had been done, we were told, actually about a week after I came back to Seoul, we were told through the official channel that China had told Pyongyang exactly that, that they could not count on Chinese veto. And then, about a

week later, the North Koreans invited former President Carter to Pyongyang to I think open the way for the North Koreans to come back to the conference table.

HAN: Well most of the Korean government, including the president at that time, didn't have such a positive reaction to that possibility. I personally thought that that could be useful depending upon how Mr. Carter would handle it and behave it, and I think he handled it rather well under the circumstances.

CHINOY: Where were you when you heard Kim Il Sung had died, what was your immediate reaction? Because a summit had just been agreed between North and South Korea and suddenly you had this very dramatic, out-of-the-blue development. Tell me about that immediate aftermath.

HAN: Well, Mr. Carter came back with Kim Il Sung's consent to have the summit meeting. They had scheduled a meeting for I think July 25th of 1994, and the announcement was made on July 8th or 9th. Presumably, Kim Il Sung had died on July 8th, and we were having a meeting of the principles to prepare for the summit meeting on the 9th. As we were having the meeting in the morning, we also heard that North Korea was going to make a major, serious announcement of some kind. We didn't know exactly what it was going to be, but it was supposed to be very serious, and the announcement was made at 12:00 noon, and as soon as we learned about it the meeting itself was held at a location not very far from the Blue House, and we all went over to Blue House to talk with the president.

Well it was a shock, and I think at that time the president and the principles, including the defense minister, made the right decision in how to react, what we do as far as the culture of our military would be, what our reactive measures, both on the military and the civilian side, would have to be, and even though we didn't have much time to prepare, there were some very serious and important decisions made right there.

The North Koreans complained about our reaction in the same way when Kim Jong Il died, and that was to be expected. Kim Il Sung was the person responsible for the Korean war, where millions of Koreans died, and we had all kinds of disasters because of him. So there are ways of expressing feelings, and I think it was perfectly reasonable not to express our regret to the North Korean people, and I don't think it's very reasonable to expect us to say that we are really sad about his or his son's death. The complaint was to be expected but I don't think quite warranted.

Part II: The Agreed Framework

CHINOY: Despite all of that, within a matter of weeks, the U.S. and North Korea were negotiating what eventually led to the Agreed Framework that was signed in the fall of 1994. South Korea was not a participant in those negotiations. How concerned were you – how much concern was there that Washington and Pyongyang were going to cut a deal that would not suit South Korean interests?

HAN: Well we were in very close contact and consultation with the United States, and as the negotiators themselves, including Bob Gallucci would talk about, particularly between him and myself, we had a very open and heart-to-heart discussion of the issues. We had our own representative in Geneva, when the negotiation was going on, even though in the meeting room itself we didn't have our own representative. I think it was basically it was a three-way negotiation rather than a bilateral negotiation. So, as one would expect, there were divided views within South Korea, as there would be in any such country on such an issue, and there were people who wanted to get more out of the negotiating process, there were people

who wanted to get a resolution of the issue on the basis of some kind of balance, and at that time what interested me, the main sticking point was whether we can put a phrase in the agreement itself that North Korea would engage in bilateral talks with South Korea. And because North Korea resisted doing that, I think the agreement itself was delayed by at least a week, or maybe a couple of weeks. But ultimately North Korea relented, agreed to put it into the agreement, which was the only way that the South Korean public and political circles would be able to accept the agreement.

CHINOY: With the benefit of hindsight, looking back now, how do you assess what the Agreed Framework did and did not accomplish? And also, what, if any lessons are there in thinking about dealing with North Korea going forward?

HAN: Well I think the agreement itself was a reasonable one, and actually a good one, because this is not a surrender document by anybody. We had to give North Korea a stake to implement and abide by the agreement, which was partly light water reactors, partly the heavy oil, and so I don't think the so-called gift part, concessions, were excessive to what North Korea promised to do. It was not only freezing their program, but North Korea also promised to ultimately dismantle their nuclear program, given the conditions are met. Now, clearly along the way, North Korea violated the agreement, but I don't think the North Korean violation of the agreement is the fault of the agreement. Any agreement, no matter how good it is, maybe even the better it is, the more incentive there is on the part of at least one party to violate it. And North Korea did. And so I don't think it's fair to blame the Geneva Framework for what North Korea had done later. They went into the uranium enrichment program precisely because I think the Geneva Agreed Framework closed the doors for their continued working on their regular plutonium-based nuclear program.

I think politically, it is impossible for anyone, either in the United States or in South Korea, or other countries, which contributed, including Japan and EU and some Southeast Asian countries to want to approve another light water reactor deal. Even then there was the controversy about whether light water was proliferation-proof or not. Scientifically, I really, I'm not a scientist, I don't know whether there was one hundred percent proof or not, but certainly the prevailing judgment was that it is an effective control of the weapons program. At that time, I personally wondered why North Korea really wanted to have the light water reactors. I think in part it was more of a political trophy, for those people who wanted to sell the issue and get whatever benefit they could get, to tell their superiors including Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung that this is enough of a compensation for their freezing their nuclear program. But whatever the real reason was, I don't think it was because the North Koreans were convinced that they could actually make nuclear weapons out of the light water reactors.

CHINOY: Former South Korean Foreign Minister Han Sung Joo, thank you very much for speaking with us.

Han Sung Joo is the Chairman of the International Policity Studies Institute in Seoul, Korea. Dr. Han was the ROK Minister of Foreign Affairs (1993-94), the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Cyprus (1996-97), a member of the UN Inquiry Commission on the 1994 Rwanda Genocide (1999), Chairman of the East Asia Vision Group (2000-01), and Ambassador of the Republic of Korea to the United States (2003-05). He also served as the Director of Ilmin International Relations Institute at Korea University (1995-2002). Han is a graduate of Seoul National University and received a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley. Previously, he taught at the City University of New York (1970-78) and was a visiting professor at Columbia University (1986-87) and Stanford University (1992, 1995). He was also a distinguished fellow at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (1986-87). English publications include *Korean Diplomacy in an Era of Globalization* (1995), *Korea in a Changing World* (1995), and *Changing Values in Asia* (1999).

Mike Chinoy is a Senior Fellow at the US-China Institute at University of Southern California. He was CNN's Senior Asia Correspondent and served as a foreign correspondent for more than thirty years. After joining CNN at its London bureau in 1983, Chinoy served as Beijing Bureau Chief from 1987 to 1995. During that time he covered the 1989 events at Tiananmen Square, earning the CableACE, duPont and Peabody awards. He was also Hong Kong Bureau Chief for five years. His other awards include the Silver Medal from the New York Film Festival and Asian Television Awards for his reporting in Indonesia and Taiwan. Chinoy's published two books, *China Live: People Power and the Television Revolution* (1999) and *Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (2008). He taught at the USC Annenberg School of Communication and ran the School's Hong Kong summer program 2007-2009. From 2006-2009 he was Edgerton Senior Fellow at the Pacific Council for International Policy.