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**Season Preview:
Next Steps in Korea-U.S. Relations**

**Ambassador Christopher R. Hill, Dean of the Josef Korbel School of International
Studies, University of Denver**

in conversation with Ambassador Mark C. Minton, President, The Korea Society

MARK MINTON (Moderator):

Good morning. Welcome to The Korea Society, and welcome to *Studio Korea*, our new program featuring prominent experts discussing current issues affecting Korea and the Korean-American relationship. I'm Mark Minton, President of The Korea Society and your moderator this morning.

Our guest today, Ambassador Christopher R. Hill, is one of the most distinguished and knowledgeable authorities on U.S. relations with Asia, and specifically with Korea. Ambassador Hill is a four-time U.S. Ambassador, including to the Republic of Korea. He is also a former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and former lead American negotiator at the Six-Party Talks, an international forum whose goal is to find a peaceful resolution to the North Korean nuclear weapons program. We're delighted to have Ambassador Hill here with us this morning. Welcome.

CHRISTOPHER HILL:

Thank you very much. Fortunately, the adjective "beleaguered" is no longer included when my career is summarized. It used to appear frequently. [Laughter]

MARK MINTON:

Well, we'll try not to beleaguer you today, Chris. [Laughter] The Obama administration is about to begin its second term. Park Geun-hye takes office next month in Seoul. Many believe that Lee Myung-bak and Barack Obama oversaw one of the best Korea-U.S. relationships ever. Do you believe the current relationship will change in anyway?

CHRISTOPHER HILL:

Before I answer that question, I'd like to say what a pleasure it is to be back here. The Korea Society is of paramount importance to Korea-U.S. relations. You have made an outstanding contribution, and I am sure you will continue to do so. I'll never forget when the newly minted Korean President Lee Myung-bak chose The Korea Society as his first stop when arriving in New York. I believe the work of The Korea Society will remain vital to the relationship between the two countries.

I am very optimistic about our relationship with Korea. This relationship has grown under several U.S. administrations. The first term of George W. Bush's administration was quite different from his second. Obviously his two terms in office were very different from the first term of the Obama administration. At the same time, we managed the transition from the Roh Moo-hyun administration to that of Lee Myung-bak. The relationship continues unchecked. We have moved forward, and I have every reason to believe that will continue.

Of course, that does not mean that things will remain the same. Park Geun-hye will bring her own unique style and perhaps a different approach, including when dealing with North Korea. I think it behooves the United States and Korea to continue to work closely together...I have every reason to believe things will work, provided we stay close.

MARK MINTON:

Chris, I'd like to go into a little more detail about one of the policy issues that the two new administrations will have to deal with, and that's North Korea. Of course, the United States and the Republic of Korea aren't the only places going through transitions with their governments. North Korea saw the entrance of Kim Jong Un about a year ago. China and Japan have also acquired new leaders recently. The combinations have been scrambled; yet it seems there is opportunity for a new beginning. Of course, this new beginning carries a lot of weight from the past. How do we move forward with the handling of North Korea? Is it possible there will be another joint diplomatic effort involving the countries I just mentioned?

CHRISTOPHER HILL:

Well, there's been a lot of discussion. Do we have the right format? Should it be a different format? Should it be more bilateral or less multilateral? My own view is that the format is not the problem. That's not to say that the Six-Party Talks have been perfect. Perhaps there should be eight parties. Perhaps there should be four. I don't think that's the essential problem.

Putting aside the issue of North Korean intransigence, I think the essential concern is that China has a real job to do with respect to bringing the North Koreans along. While China has had some success holding down the number of provocations by North Korea; China has not been successful using its leverage to convince the North Koreans that the September 2005 statement requires abandonment of all nuclear programs. The Chinese have come back to us saying there is nothing more they can do. When looking at the volume of interaction between China and North Korea, I frankly beg to differ.

It's very clear that China has failed to develop an internal consensus as to how to handle North Korea. U.S. newspapers often discuss China's concern about handling a large number of North Korean refugees. I think China's worries about a potential demise of North Korea is far more profound than just the question of refugees. I think the internal dynamics in China are dominating the picture there. Many of the Chinese see North Korea as sort of a win-lose proposition. If North Korea goes down, that is a victory for the United States and a defeat for China. This type of zero-sum thinking is very prevalent there.

Secondly, as China goes forward, they have to deal with a mismatch between their political system and their economic system. They know they have some major changes ahead, and I don't think they want to see a change in North Korea that might affect internal change in China. Think of the implications with the end of this Marxist-Leninist state on China's border. What would be some of the internal issues affecting China should that occur? When you look at the relative sizes of both China and North Korea, you might think that any such change wouldn't affect China. It's my belief it most certainly would.

I think the United States and the ROK need to have some serious talks with the Chinese about our common objectives. In the absence of a real Chinese push on North Korea (a push that's in the context of things that both we and a new South Korean administration could do) I don't think we'll see much change. Instead, I think we'll see a lot of endless speculation of whether Kim Jong Un will encourage reform—a constant grasping at straws. I'm open to the idea that he could be a reformer, but I think you have to deal with facts, and we don't have any facts that really support that.

MARK MINTON:

Chris, I'd like to talk for a few minutes about those facts. Of course, the "black hole" or "black box" in all of this policy comes down to the intentions of North Korea. All we can really do is read its reactions to stimuli and note its own initiatives; and most observers see a very mixed bag since Kim Jong Un took over. We were hopeful in our effort at restarting diplomacy early last year, but that was dashed by the North Korean missile tests. Recently, we've seen Governor Richardson travel to Pyongyang with Eric Schmidt of Google. If you look at North Korea's behavior over the last year, can you read the tea leaves about their intentions?

CHRISTOPHER HILL:

One thing we see is that the North Korean leadership goes beyond just the personage of Kim Jong Un. At least for now, we have to count the regents there, including Jang Song Taek. That observation leads us to believe that the leadership wants to be different from the previous leadership. There's definitely a change of style, and politically I don't think that can be dismissed.

The problem has been determining whether the changes are of any substance. There seems to be some interest in economic reform, but before anyone gets too excited about that, I think we should take into account that any new economic plan may be like that of Lenin in 1921. In other words, the scope of economic reform may not include the brilliant thought that maybe the producers of agricultural goods should have the right to retain some of the agricultural goods they're producing. We need to be a little cautious about predicting a whole new ball game there.

My view has always been that we should engage North Korea as much as possible. I think the dysfunction we see in North Korea goes far beyond management by the Kim Il Sung clan. The one thing we can predict with accuracy is *not* being able to anticipate how North Korea falls and or when it will fall. Should there be political change, it will be caused either by collapse or some other unforeseen mechanism. It's pretty clear that North Korea is a country that's going to need a lot of help, including the development of skills along the lines of what South Korea has been doing in Kaesong—as long as the projects do not involve simply handing money over to North Korea.

As for the trip to North Korea by Bill Richardson and Eric Schmidt of Google...I think that type of thing needs to be planned a little better, and people need to assess what they're looking for in terms of an outcome. I do believe there's room for talking to the North Koreans and I believe there's room for some type of engagement. At the same time, I think we need to remain firm that we can't go too far down this road without North Korea going down the same road—the road towards denuclearization.

MARK MINTON:

I want to ask you about another element that's coming to the forefront of any prospective international engagement with North Korea, and that's the issue of human rights. It's been a small dot on the horizon for so many years; but today human rights considerations have become more important to the international community at large.

Within the last couple of days, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, strongly suggested there be an international inquiry into human rights offenses committed by the DPRK regime—offenses she described as gross mistreatment “unthinkable in the twenty-first century.” Should we reengage with North Korea, will we have to deal in a more visible way with the human rights atrocities there? If there is international and public pressure to do so, how will diplomats factor that into the equation?

CHRISTOPHER HILL:

I think as a general proposition, we should not give into the notion of North Korean exceptionalism—that they do not have to answer questions or aspire to the same standards as the rest of the international community. These are not (withstanding comments such as one hears from Putin) only America’s values shotgunned into the international agenda. Increasingly, these are values not only “made in America,” but are values that any country desiring to be a member in good standing of the international community should live up to.

I have no problem with the issue of human rights being factored into the international community’s agenda; nor do I feel that we should be afraid to raise the issue lest we hurt North Korea’s feelings. North Koreans have fairly thick skins, and they have managed to survive having their feelings hurt. In the past, we essentially had an envoy writing opinion pieces in U.S. newspapers complaining about the human rights standards in North Korea. I’m not sure we got too far with that. It was a bit of a *Dialogue of the Deaf* (and I might add that of an internal dialogue) and it really didn’t affect the North Koreans.

When I talked to the North Koreans, I stated that if we could get the denuclearization agenda moving, the next phase would be a bilateral, formal U.S. dialogue about eventual recognition. We basically put everything on the table in that September 2005 statement; subject to sequencing and other issues. In the context of a bilateral agenda, we were prepared (and, frankly were going to insist) that we have a human rights track within the bilateral agenda.

I suspect if the European Union established a formal agenda with the North Koreans, they would insist on a human rights track. I think many countries would have a human rights track. With respect to a country like Japan; the human rights track might be focused on the issue of abductees. I see nothing wrong with laying that out.

The problem that I had while sitting at the Diaoyutai negotiating table in Beijing was people complaining that denuclearization alone was not enough, and that we had to add human rights into the mix. The problem with that was we were dealing in a multilateral setting. The Chinese certainly “contained their enthusiasm” about this idea. They couldn’t quite understand why we would want to do it there. The Russians surely didn’t understand that, either. Frankly, there wasn’t a lot of support.

So, as I did with the North Koreans on many other occasions, I raised the Japanese abduction issue in a pragmatic way, reminding the North Koreans that if they looked at a map, Japan is pretty close to them and it would behoove them to try to reach out to that country (one of the world’s leading countries) and try to find a way to establish a relationship; as they weren’t going to be able to avoid issues such as human rights.

I tried to do this bilaterally in the context of the Six-Party Talks; but the notion of introducing human rights as a formal matter in the context of trying to get rid of North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction was frankly a little cynical to some people. I think some countries were worried that it might actually succeed; so they chose to introduce elements that would enhance the prospects of failure.

MARK MINTON:

My last question is on a different issue. You've been following Korea for a long time. One of your early assignments was as a Junior Foreign Service Officer. You then became Ambassador, and then the Assistant Secretary. Now, of course, you are Dean of the Josef Korbel School at the University of Denver.

There is a new phenomenon referred to as "Global Korea." This is shorthand for the fact that Korea's growing economy and stature economically is giving it a higher degree of involvement in international affairs, such as hosting various international summits. For the next two years, Korea will be part of the Security Council of the United Nations. Given Korea's neighbors in Asia (several very large and globally important countries such as China, Japan, and Russia) could you define for us what "Global Korea" can actually aspire to?

CHRISTOPHER HILL:

When I worked in Korea in the mid-1980s, I witnessed a country struggling with issues surrounding its economic growth (and the growth rates at that time hovered around 10 percent). To see that along with the Peninsular issues—and then come back as I did in 2004 and witness Korea mounting the global stage—was kind of a Rip Van Winkle experience. None of us paid much attention to Korea during the intervening twenty years. Witnessing their growth was really quite impressive and inspiring. I believe Korea realizes that its interests need to be global and understands the necessity of developing international relationships.

When I went to Baghdad, Korea had one of the best missions in Iraq. They had a great understanding of life there. They understood how business worked, and they had a clear grasp of Iraqi politics. The Korean Ambassador and his team came over to our embassy, and I went to theirs.

Korea is a country that has now emerged on the world stage. China *should* have emerged on the world stage by now, but has largely been hampered by domestic issues. Of course, every country has domestic problems. The South Koreans have just been through an election focused on domestic issues. China has huge international responsibilities, and I think they are having trouble meeting those responsibilities because of their domestic problems. I think you have a very outward-looking ROK and an inward-looking PRC. There is a bit of a mismatch, right now, and I think it affects the Six-Party process and the quality of cooperative relationships we're trying to have in that part of the world.

The second issue for Korea is the Korean-Japanese relationship, and that's always fun. When we started the Six-Party Talks, I was encouraged to have trilateral meetings because, after all, the U.S., Korea and Japan (the three democracies of the Six-Party Talks and the three baseball-playing countries of the Six-Party Talks) surely should be able to forge a common agreement and really roll the rest of the six parties. Alas, I spent most of my time mediating between Japan and the ROK. Lee Myung-bak attempted to improve that relationship, but clearly, it is going to be a challenge for some time. The problems of the ROK-Japan relationship are considerable and cannot be easily dismissed.

Although Korea is now thinking globally, it still has to deal with a lot of neighborhood concerns. The maritime issues between Korea and Japan (and China and Japan) have to be dealt with wisely. I think Korea can be a producer of stability there; but all problems have to be carefully addressed. Public opinion in Japan has recently gone through a very tough stretch. The Japanese people are concerned about whether the country is truly moving forward. It's very important that the Korean government, especially now, try to tamp down on any problems with Japan and try to keep communications with China open. As an American Ambassador, Sung Kim sees this. When you go into the Foreign Ministry, you don't just talk about the Peninsula. You talk about foreign assistance in Africa. You talk about international energy issues. You talk about peacekeeping. It's quite a change, and a welcome one, at that.

Mark, I included in my book that's about to be published a story I'll always remember. When I first arrived in South Korea, you invited me to meet with a group of Korean intellectuals, and a number of them asked me why would someone coming from Poland be able to manage issues in South Korea. I replied, "Well, can you think of a medium-sized country that has two larger neighbors and who, when they weren't tormenting each other, were tormenting you?" They, of course, were thinking in terms of Korea. I was equating this example with the fact that these patterns of problems don't just occur in one part of the world.

Moreover, I told them that Poland had made the decision to have a strategic relationship with us because they realized that was the best way for them to make their way in East Central Europe. I believe we have made a similar bet—that the relationship with distant powers, including the United States, is something that can help Korea make its way in its own neighborhood.

MARK MINTON:

I'd like you to join me in thanking our guest, Ambassador Christopher R. Hill. Please give him a round of applause. [Applause]

CHRISTOPHER HILL:

Thank you very much. Thank you.

MARK MINTON:

Thank you, Chris.