

Global Journalist: The Brewing Conflicts in the Peninsulas

Abstract: On this Dec. 26, 2002 program, journalists discuss how nuclear weapons is influencing foreign relations talk in North and South Korea and how the United States is exerting its power in the Korean and Arabian peninsulas.

Host: Stuart Loory

Guests:

- [Martin Schram](#)
- [Mike Chinoy](#)
- [Woosuk Ken Choi](#)

Producers: [Pat Kelley](#)

Directors: [Mary Furness](#)

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Stuart Loory 0:08

Welcome to Global Journalist on KBIA. This is the program that says mid-Missourians - indeed many Americans - are interested in international news. I'm Stuart Loory of the Missouri School of Journalism. There cannot be much doubt that the United States is the single most powerful country in the world right now. In fact, many historians and international experts will tell you that the United States now is the most powerful country in the history of mankind. If that's so, then why are two relatively small countries, one endowed with a precious natural resource oil but not much else, and the other a small Asian land with nothing to boast off. Why are those two countries thumbing their noses at the United States. The contempt shown by Iraq and North Korea for the United States has led Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to say that this country is capable of fighting two wars, one against each of those countries at the same time, and still wage the war against terrorism with al-Qaida and other non-governmental terrorist groups. But such threats don't seem to amount to much. North Koreans have broken the seals on a nuclear reactor capable of producing weapons grade plutonium and have said they're going to start it up. Saddam Hussein's regime continues to criticize the United States and Israel, even as American troops are arriving in neighboring countries by the thousands, getting ready to march on Baghdad. Is North Korea becoming another crisis of Persian Gulf proportions? Will we be at war on the Arabian Peninsula before the winter is out? To discuss these possibilities today, we have in Seoul, Korea Woosuk Ken Choi of the newspaper Chosun Ilbo, in Taipei, Taiwan Mike Chinoy Senior Asia Correspondent of CNN based in Hong Kong, and in Washington, Martin Schram, a syndicated columnist for Scripps-Howard Newspapers. Let's start with Mike Chinoy.

Mike, you have made 13 trips to North Korea in the past 12 years. Why such belligerence these days? What's going on there?

Mike Chinoy 2:28

I think there are a number of factors in a very, very complicated situation. Some of the belligerence is simply the way North Korea expresses itself to the outside world and indeed internally. It's a style of rhetoric in its government-controlled media is always very excitable, even under the more calm periods of time. But what you have, I mean, fundamentally in North Korea is a regime which is very very worried about its own survival. In the last decade the North Koreans have seen all the — their one time communist allies in the socialist bloc disappear. Many of the contemporaries of the previous North Korean leader Kim Il Sung like East Germany's Honecker, Romania's Ceaușescu have been toppled from power. North Korea's become somewhat estranged from its Chinese and Russian allies. They have terrible economic problems and they've had consistent, antagonistic relationship with the United States. And so the regime there sees the world very much as stacked against it. And I think you could make a pretty strong argument that a great deal of what has driven North Korean behavior since the early 90s has been a strategy of trying to leverage what the U.S. sees as threatening things like a missile program in the nuclear program to extract concessions from the United States and its allies to ensure the survival of the North Korean regime. And I think that dynamic is still at work today.

Stuart Loory 4:08

Well, Mike, there's also the possibility that North Korea is trying to drive a wedge between the United States and its ally on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea. Ken Choi, what do you think about that? Is it working?

Woosuk Ken Choi 4:24

At the moment, we have a new president-elect, and he seems like he's a very staunch supporter of the current President Kim Dae-Jung, who initiated the Sunshine Policy which is like sort of engagement policy on North Korea. To the U.S. views and to many South Korean conservatives, present Kim's Sunshine Policy have so far not been functioning properly and probably this is the a, a clear sign that that is Sunshine Policy have failed or has not been working. And it is not clear at the moment what the new president-elect is thinking or or viewing the current situation because he hasn't he hasn't said much about the North Korean nuclear issues. So far, it seems to me that that it will be a big problem for the for the new incoming government. The only one thing for sure, or certain countries that the vast majority of South Koreans believe that you the United States should not conduct any preemptive military strike against North Korea because that will just trigger a chain a chain reaction to the to the peninsula, which the capital city of South Korea is only like 37 miles south of the DMZ, and we have 35,000 U.S. troops along the DMZ, and it will just create a catastrophe the Holocaust in this Peninsula. So the vast majority people do not want a war. But at the same time, the vast majority the public does not want North Korea to have a nuclear reactor as well because it is causing a huge problem this region. And it remains to be seen with the North Koreans

tactics of driving South Korea and the United States a wedge sort of remains to be seen.

Stuart Loory 6:23

Yeah, I think we better say that the DMZ is the demilitarized zone, which was the the border established almost 50 years ago at the end of the Korean War. Marty Schram, I get the feeling from what Mike Chinoy and Ken Choi are saying that the situation is not viewed as seriously in Asia, as it is in Washington. Why is Washington taking such a hard line on what's going on?

Martin Schram 6:56

Well, you know, Stuart, I was just thinking almost the same thing. I was thinking as I as I heard the Mike and then Ken Choi talking as well that that the situation is, I think, viewed seriously but differently in the Far East as opposed to in Washington. And and I think that that the reason for that may be in part because all three countries are looking through the prism of their own realities which which have been cast many years ago. Washington still looks, of course, at the at the Koreas as saying, what do we do to to make sure that North Korea doesn't do anything drastic until there can be reunification? That's basically what what what they're saying. And I think Mike Chinoy was very accurate when he summed up what what North Korea is doing, which is basically saying you'd be paranoid to if everyone was against you. And and in in South Korea that they're they're feeling their own way now with a new sense of what kind of relationships they want with the world and with the United States. I guess I was, I was surprised when the United States confronted North Korea with the evidence that as Assistant Secretary of State Kelly did in October that that that they apparently were continuing with a nuclear program because of the way they did it and their response to it. Don't ask the question if you don't know the answer, and you're not prepared to live with it. And if they're prepared to do if they knew what the answer was, because the evidence was irrefutable, then you can say North Korea will either say yes or no. Well, if they say no, then it's lying as usual and you deal in that genre, but if they say yes, what are you going to do? I don't think the Bush administration has the slightest idea what to do.

Stuart Loory 9:05

Marty, you did a column the other day, pointing out to Donald Rumsfeld last week. It said, "We can fight two and a half war at once. We have the military power to do that." Do you think that the United States is really capable of fighting two and a half wars? And do you think we would fight two and a half wars if if we had to?

Martin Schram 9:29

I think that's one of the very few things that turns out to be consistent over the decades I've been in this town, Stuart. I don't think the United States is really capable of fighting two and a half wars simultaneously now nor were they when I first came to town in the in the late 1960s. When I first met you, by the way. And I found out that Defense Secretary Robert McNamara had a statement posture statement where he said our entire defense spending was predicated on the assumption that we have to fight two and a half wars simultaneously: one Vietnam, one in Europe and a brushfire

somewhere else like the Middle East. And no one I talked to all the senators on the armed services and foreign relations committees. They'd never heard of such a thing. They held hearings and did a Washington thing scaled back to two wars instead of two and a half. But that was they didn't change the budget. And we couldn't do it then. We can't do it now. That's the real problem that the Bush administration faces. It doesn't know which war wants to fight it.

Mike Chinoy 10:30

Marty, can I can I can I jump in on this issue of war here because I got a couple of very, very important points to be made about. First of all, if you study carefully the official statements from the North Koreans going back for a long time many months prior to their admission in October that they had this covert uranium enrichment program. The North the North Koreans had had had made making a couple of points very consistently. Number one, and this is points that actually were made to me repeatedly on trips there in the mid and late 90s. Number one, the root of all this goes back to the 1994 agreements. So the critical Agreed Framework in which Pyongyang froze the plutonium based nuclear facility that it's now reopening. In return, the United States promised to provide shipments of fuel oil, and to help build two new proliferation resistant reactors and more broadly to agree to a kind of overall thaw in dealings with North Korea. And the North Koreans were very frustrated by what they felt was the United States not delivering on those covenants. The Clinton administration made those commitments in the fall of '94. And then the Republicans took control of Congress right after, and it became very hard for Clinton administration to follow through. And the North Koreans complained bitterly about the delays to the reactors, which were supposed to be finished next year and are nowhere close to regular delays in the shipments of fuel. And more broadly, they thought that they were going to trade this nuclear program away in return for a really meaningful sea change in relations with the U.S. in which Washington and Pyongyang would no longer be adversaries. And I think there's some evidence to suggest that when they began this new uranium enrichment program that they acknowledged in October, it was a kind of insurance policy because they weren't confident that the the diplomat the sea change in the diplomatic environment, vis-à-vis Washington, was going to happen. And what is interesting is even after the October admission, the North Koreans have consistently said they're willing to address all U.S. security concerns, as long as the United States will end what it calls the "hostile policy." That's their their language towards North Korea. And in that context, the Bush administration, when it took office not only stopped dead in its tracks, the Clinton administration's cautious attempts to improve ties, but put North Korea on the Axis of Evil and took a much more hostile policy. Understandably enough, given all the horrible things that happened in North Korea, but from Pyongyang's point of view, this has meant that the United States was again treating it like an enemy. And but interestingly, throughout this, the North Koreans keep saying, we want to sign a peace pact, we want to put an end to this hostile relationship. And in that context, all these issues aren't negotiable. But the Bush administration says, "Why should we trust the North Koreans? They broke one agreement, they had a secret nuclear program. We don't want to deal with them at all until they back down." And my own sense from talking to people the danger here is that there's no negotiations and no dialogue. Neither side wanting a

larger, more dangerous confrontation. But both could end up stumbling into it because they don't have a mechanism to get out of it. And that I think is what makes it dangerous now.

Martin Schram 13:54

Exactly.

Stuart Loory 13:55

Yeah. Mike, why is it that we we can't open negotiations. Instead of opening negotiations, the Bush administration simply shut off the oil supply. Why did they do that? That seems confrontational in itself?

Mike Chinoy 14:12

Well, I think my I was just in Washington for working on a CNN special on this whole issue. I think my my sense is that there are divisions in Washington, but that there's a school of thought, which is the same school of thought that was very skeptical of going through the UN to deal with Iraq that feels that North Korea is fundamentally evil place, cannot be trusted with anything that the maximum pressure that can be brought to bear on it is the right thing to do and that North Korea admitting to a secret nuclear program only confirms this view that the Pyongyang regime is beyond the pale and I think there's another view that says they may be beyond the pale, but we have to deal with them. What there are interesting parallels with the 1994 Nuclear Crisis, which almost led to war before former President Carter visited North Korea paved the way to this Agreed Framework deal, which I was actually the only reporter who went to North Korea with Carter. So I was right in the middle of that, and that is that the administration has made agreeing to negotiate the reward its offering to North Korea in return for what it wants, essentially as unilateral North Korean concessions, but when it's on the table, but only if we talk and that's the gap. They're not able to bridge.

Stuart Loory 15:26

Okay, we'll pick up on this in just a second, but we have to take a break right now. This is Global Journalist on KBIA. I'm Stuart Loory.

Welcome back to Global Journalist. You may listen to this program again, ask questions or make comments by going to www.globaljournalist.org or hear in mid-Missouri by calling us at 573-882-9641. Before the break Mike, you were saying that Washington is, is perhaps divided and somewhat confused on what to do. Ken Choi, in Seoul, is there disappointment or criticism because the United States is not negotiating with North Korea?

Woosuk Ken Choi 16:21

Actually, not much create the US government policies criticism, but it's actually a growing number of people are getting worried that that North Korea might cross the line that that it should never do so. Actually, so far the Korean South Korean government's position was that the negotiations should be conducted by South Korea with North Korea instead of just going having you know U.S. North Korea direct negotiations.

That's because South Koreans all along, worry that will be left out of the process and the United State policy so far was like always having South Korea getting involved in the negotiations and have North Korea come to terms with South Korea in sign peace treaty and so on. So far, I guess North Korea is trying to drive a wedge between the two countries and trying to force the United States to come to their table dealing with the whole issue. So the Korean government so far is quite ambivalent because the new we have a new president-elect then there will be a transition of governments. So it there's a great deal of uncertainty what to do with North Korea. Actually, I think, probably this week or so South Korean government's gonna send an envoy to U.S. and U.S. is going to send envoy to South Korea trying to deal with this issue. It remains to be seen whether whether North Korea is going to be succeeding by by dragging U.S. into the table. However, in my opinion, North Korea is bluffing on this issue because it wants to the US consulate, their table dealing with their issues on their terms. I'm not sure whether whether us will comply with that, but um, it just remains to be seen.

Martin Schram 18:22

Stuart, I was just gonna say is I was listening to what both Mike Chinoy and Ken Choi were saying. It occurred to me that, that that the reality that's going on in Washington, is there a lot of people who aren't listening to that sort of analysis and not acting or even thinking in those in those terms. There's William Safire, writing a column in the New York Times says that the first step that ought to happen now is that the United States should start withdrawing all of its troops from South Korea.

Stuart Loory 18:54

I just wanted to bring that up. Go ahead.

Martin Schram 18:56

And I wondered if I and he says because we're not imperialist. And if a democratic country doesn't want us there, we shouldn't be there. And I wondered what Ken Choi thinks of that.

Woosuk Ken Choi 19:07

Actually, we just, it was reported today that William Saphire wrote that column in the New York Times today. It is true that some some, some South Koreans probably does not want to see U.S. troops in South Korean Peninsula. But that's and the growing number in the past like five or four months of people sort of joined that momentum. That's only because recently, actually about six months ago two South Korean middle school, female students were killed by the U.S., what is it, the armored personnel carrier accidentally, and—

Martin Schram 19:46

Traffic accidents sort of thing

Woosuk Ken Choi 19:48

Traffic accident, right? And the two two soldiers were acquitted in November and that sort of brought quite an uproar in the general public saying that, you know, kill kill two

people and not being guilty of anything and being sent back home free was sort of a big shock to many South Koreans. However, that's that and the other vast majority population still believe, in my opinion, that U.S. troops in Korea are the protector of the whole of the people.

Stuart Loory 20:18

Are the defense against North Korea. I should imagine that the North Koreans certainly want American troops to leave South Korea. Mike, is that one of the big issues?

Mike Chinoy 20:31

Well, that's always been a big issue. But it was interesting during this brief period in the year 2000, when the Clinton administration made some efforts to improve ties with North Korea. Then Secretary of State Albright went to Pyongyang. That didn't loom very large as a North Korean demand, although it's always been sort of part of the orthodoxy. I think one of the very interesting questions going forward is there has been a groundswell of anti-American feeling, as Ken was saying, sparked partly by this tragic case of two Korean girls who were killed in an accident when they were hit by an American military vehicle. But I think there's there's something deeper and in to two senses. One is that the, the the North, the South Koreans, I think have been somewhat frustrated and resentful by what they see is kind of high-handed American approach towards their own concerns vis-à-vis North Korea as South Korea has become a kind of more modern and successful and confident society. And the other thing is that because of the Sunshine Policy of the outgoing President Kim Dae-Jung, I'm not sure how many South Koreans really see North Korea as totally as an adversary but it's a much more complicated view because they are after all, Koreans on both sides and there's a lot of common links and and that raise if an American policy is based on seeing North Korea solely as evil, menacing threat, and South Koreans have a much more ambiguous view of what North Korea. There's been a lot of South Korean aid, a lot of contacts, economic contacts, tourism and so on. It raises questions of how much South Korea and the U.S. are in sync in how they view North Korea and therefore how much they can be in sync in the policies they adopted. You see this divergence now with I interviewed the man who won the presidential race, Roh Moo-hyun shortly before the election, and he was very critical of the Axis of Evil rhetoric and the refusal of the Bush administration to engage in dialogue and said this is dangerous for Korea that he favored unconditional dialogue with North Korea. And the Bush administration says no talks at all until the North caves in, so I think there is a big gap that they're going to have to work hard both sides to try and manage.

Martin Schram 22:50

And you know, Stuart, this leads to the central question of what Washington really thinks is going to happen now not just what it wants to be. What do they really think is going to happen in the in the Bush administration? And and I think the problem is that that no one on any of this side, certainly not in the United States, really is thinking in terms of what is in the narrow self-interests of all three of these countries, North South Korea and Washington in the United States. And if so, how do we get people to act what is really in their bottom line self-interest? North Korea if Mike Chinoy was right, and

I think he was about what North Korea sees of the world that it has no no friend in the world anymore and has to act on its own if it's going to really protect its own interests. How do you how do you get them into the involved in the world and, and is the bomb really the one thing that they want most of all. Is that this narrow self interest? I don't think so.

Stuart Loory 23:55

Do we think they're really building a bomb in North Korea?

Martin Schram 23:58

I do.

Stuart Loory 24:00

Mike?

Mike Chinoy 24:01

Well, I mean, the the CIA issued a report in November saying that they thought they'd already acquired enough plutonium before 1994 for one or two bombs. The indications of the new program that was revealed in October suggests that it's still several it's an attempt to acquire the tech-technology to enrich uranium and that's several years away from making a bomb. But if they go ahead with the reactivation of the reactor that's been frozen and you've got lots of fuel rods that have been in a cooling pond my understanding from the experts is that if they went ahead with this it would only be a matter of months before before they would have enough plutonium for a few bombs and if they all the reactors that are now frozen go back on stream they could make more. You know, watching the situation the they may well if there's no dialogue and there's no military action it's totally conceivable in six months that the North Koreans will have a up and running nuclear weapons capability because what else is going to stop them unless the American strategy of marshaling international pressure the Chinese, the Russians, the U.N. and so on works and there is a debate over whether North Korea is vulnerable to that kind of pressure. Now, one school of thought arguing that they've had so much more international aid in contact since the mid-90s, that if they risk losing it, they might bend. Another school of thought says this is a regime that let two million of its own people starve to death in the mid-90s without having the regime itself fundamentally threatened and they're perfectly able to take whatever hits come internationally and carry on. We'll have to see who's right.

Stuart Loory 25:47

Okay, I'm sorry, but we did promise our listeners a little bit about the Persian Gulf area and we've got two minutes left. Marty, January 27 is the the deadline for U.N. inspectors to make decisions on what's going on in Iraq. And the Bush administration is expected to make a decision right after that on what it's going to do. What do you think's going to happen?

Martin Schram 26:16

Well, I think I think the Bush administration is going to wind up fighting one of its two and a half wars. That's what I think. And I say that, thinking that they don't have a way not to do it at this point. If indeed, the report says what we expected to which is that Saddam hasn't told all that he knows, etc, etc. And, and these two things are linked, by the way and these two topics we're talking about, because one concern in Washington now that you start to hear is, if North Korea is so starving, would they give nuclear material is not a bomb to any terrorists from the Middle East with an awful lot of money to spend and no plutonium. So there are all sorts of concerns that bring these things together.

Stuart Loory 27:10

That's certainly a grim picture that you paint.

Martin Schram 27:12

Well, that they've been known to do that sort of thing in the past and they have dealt with Pakistan at great lengths. And when they deal with Pakistan, they're not always dealing just with a pro-United States form of Pakistani officials.

Mike Chinoy 27:26

They certainly have a track record of selling missile technology to other countries. I was interviewing somebody in Washington who said the great fears North Korea could become a nuclear Kmart.

Stuart Loory 27:37

Well, on on that note, I think we have to cut it off. We are out of time. Our guests today have been Mike Chinoy of CNN, Martin Schram of Scripps-Howard Newspapers and Woosuk Choi of Chosun Ilbo in Seoul, Korea. Our director is Mary Furness, and our producer Pat Kelley. For all, I'm Stuart Loory. Global Journalist will be back next week. In the meantime, a Happy New Year to all.