

On North Korea, the UN, and South Korea's Era of Global Happiness

JOON OH

Ambassador and Permanent Representative of
Korea to the United Nations in New York

An Interview with Carol Kim

Cambridge, MA, 13 March 2015

Ambassador Joon Oh is a career diplomat who has served the Republic of Korea (ROK) in various posts since joining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1978. He was appointed as Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Korea to the United Nations in New York on 20 September 2013. He is currently President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and President-Elect of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) for the 2015–2016 term. He also served as President of the Security Council for May 2014 during the 2013–2014 term. The ROK government awarded him an Order of Service Merit twice, the Order of Green Stripes in 1996 and the Order of Yellow Stripes in 2006. On 13 March 2015, Ambassador Oh delivered a keynote speech at Harvard Law School for the National Unification Advisory Council (NUAC), Boston Chapter's seminar series on North Korean human rights.

Brown Journal of World Affairs: Last December, you spoke at the UN Security Council's first ever meeting on human rights violations in North Korea. In a moving speech, you talked about families that were separated during the war and now live on opposite sides of the 38th parallel. Some surveys have shown that there is a lack of political will among younger generations in South Korea to pursue reunification. What do you think about that?

Ambassador Joon Oh: I don't think there is a lack of political will among younger generations. I think it's only that, compared to my generation, the

Copyright © 2015 by the *Brown Journal of World Affairs*

older generation, young people in South Korea do not know much about North Korea. Which is understandable, in my opinion, because most of them, even their parents, were born after the Korean War, not to mention the division of Korea in 1945.

Journal: The world has been aware of human rights violations in North Korea for well over two decades. Yet, it often seems that the issue of North Korean human rights has failed to maintain the interest of the international community, especially in comparison with other human rights campaigns that have more recently emerged. What can be done to change this? What can be done to mobilize—not only mobilize, but sustain—global interest in the human rights campaign for North Korea?

Oh: Well, actually, in the United Nations, the North Korean human rights issue has been dealt with for at least the last 10 years. But in the past, the issue was mostly dealt with in the Human Rights Council, which is in Geneva, and also in the General Assembly, so you could say that it received less attention compared to when it was discussed in the Security Council for the first time last year. One of the reasons why we are dealing with it for the first time in the Security Council is that the Security Council was originally intended to deal with security issues, not human rights. But when a human rights violation becomes so serious that it might pose a threat to peace and security, then the Security Council picks it up and deals with it. There have been only three such cases in history: Zimbabwe, Myanmar, and North Korea. As a compatriot, as a fellow Korean, it is of course sad to see the situation in North Korea worsening to the point that the issue is now dealt with in the Security Council.

285

Journal: Some political observers have said that what might be deemed reluctance to intervene in the case of North Korea, on the part of the Western world, is due to lack of geopolitical interest in the area—in comparison with, say, Syria, which presents another example of human rights violations that has captured global interest. Do you agree with this assessment?

Oh: Well, in the past, the North Korean issue within the international community and the United Nations was mostly about North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. This is a clear violation of international norms and the whole world has been concerned over this development. But the human rights issue, even though it has been there for quite a while, received

less attention partly because the North Korean issue was mostly about nuclear proliferation and partly because, as I said, the human rights issue was being dealt with in Geneva rather than in New York. It had only been known to specialists in the world dealing with human rights. But now it is getting more attention from the general public all over the world, I think.

When a human rights violation becomes so serious that it might pose a threat to peace and security, then the UN Security Council picks it up.

Journal: On the subject of nuclear proliferation, what would you say is the most important part of South Korea's agenda with regard to North Korea, particularly when it comes to North Korea's development of nuclear capabilities?

Oh: North Korea's nuclear capabilities of course pose a big threat to South Korea's security and territory. But the fact that North Korea is trying to become a new nuclear weapon state is a serious challenge not only to South Korea, but also to the NPT [Non-Proliferation Treaty] system. According to the NPT, all the states in the world—except the five original nuclear weapon states—shall not develop nuclear weapons. North Korea was a party to the NPT. But now North Korea is saying that it is leaving the system and saying that it has nuclear weapons, which is a clear challenge to the system as a whole. So the whole world is concerned about this issue. The whole world is concerned about the implications that this issue might have if we allow North Korea to get away with [creating and possessing] nuclear weapons.

Journal: South Korea suspended trips to the Mount Kumgang tourist region in North Korea after the fatal shooting of a South Korean tourist in 2008. And I understand that, currently, international legal issues make it difficult to resume intra-Korea travel. Do you think that South Korea will eventually try to resume these trips to Mount Kumgang?

Oh: The fact that we are not resuming this tourism project is not because of international sanctions. It has more to do with our bilateral relations with North Korea. Before resuming this project, we need at least to get official apologies from North Korea [for the shooting of a South Korean tourist]. North Korea should admit that it happened, and they should promise that such an occurrence will not happen in the future. I think these terms will be a minimal requirement for resuming this project. The suspension of the tourism project is not necessarily

because of international sanctions.

Journal: Since Kim Jong-un came into power in April 2012, has there been a change in South Korea's approach to North Korea?

Oh: Not much. Everyone was unsure as to what kind of policies Kim Jong-un would pursue when he came into power. But by now, it's been three years, and it seems to be pretty clear to everyone that Kim Jong-un has been more or

less following his father's and his grandfather's policies so far. So we have not seen much change in North Korea. But as the South Korean president [Park Geun-hye] made clear,

There are still millions of Koreans who have separated families in the other part of Korea. We would like to continue re-uniting them; it is a humanitarian project.

we would like to resume dialogue with North Korea. We would like to resume cooperation with North Korea when they are willing to come to the table.

Journal: What are some ideas on how South Korea and North Korea can further that cooperation?

Oh: Even now, we still have what is called the Kaesong Industrial Park. It's survived the most difficult, most strained relations between the two Koreas, even though it was closed for a few months once. We think that this project should be kept as it is, and if we can resume our talks with North Korea, we would very much like to have the resumption of reunion of families separated between the two Koreas. There are still millions of Koreans who have separated families in the other part of Korea. So we very much would like to continue reuniting them; it is a humanitarian project. We should get back to it. You also mentioned the Mount Kumgang project. That is one of the cooperative projects between the two Koreas that could be considered as a possible way of enhancing our ties.

Journal: South Korea's foreign policy vision under President Park's administration is titled "Era of Global Happiness." How does that particular foreign policy vision translate to specific multilateral initiatives at the UN?

Oh: One of the priorities of our current government in South Korea, under President Park Geun-hye, is to make our people happy. Happiness is sometimes a little difficult to define. It can be quite a subjective concept. But overall, at a domestic level, it usually has a lot to do with a government's welfare policies.

JOON OH

If we apply it to the international level, we would like to focus our diplomacy on contributing to the happiness of people in the world. In order for people to be happy there should be more peace, there should be more development, there should be more human rights so that people can live with human dignity. And that's an area in which we would like to strengthen our diplomatic efforts.

Journal: Lastly—and this is, perhaps, the most burning question from our editors—who is your favorite K-pop group or singer?

Oh: Oh, that I will have to think about. You know, I belong to the rock music generation—seventies, eighties. I'm not too familiar with K-pop groups. But usually, I like K-pop groups that actually play their musical instruments rather than song-and-dance groups. 



Photo of Ambassador Joon Oh, 13 March 2015 by Yoon Shik Kim

To see the video of this interview and access additional web content, visit the *Journal's* website at www.brown.edu/bjwa.

Copyright of Brown Journal of World Affairs is the property of Brown University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.