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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Guest: **Evans Revere**

Episode 90: An “Alternative Future” for the
Korean Peninsula

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Haenle: Recently, I sat down with Evans Revere during his trip in May to Beijing for the 7th Annual U.S.-China Strategic Track II Dialogue, which we hosted at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. Evans retired from the foreign service in 2007 after a distinguished career as one of the state department's top Asia experts. He served as the principal deputy assistant secretary and acting assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires at the U.S. embassy in Seoul, Korea during his time in the foreign service. He also has extensive experience negotiating with the North Koreans. Evans is now a senior director with the Albright Stonebridge Group and a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. During our conversation, we had the opportunity to discuss developments in the North Korean nuclear program, as well as prospects for U.S.-China and regional cooperation on this issue. Thank you for listening to the China in the World podcast. I hope you enjoy our conversation with Evans Revere. And please do leave us a rating and comment on iTunes, as well as head to the Carnegie-Tsinghua website to see more work from our scholars.

Well, thank you for being with us today, Evans. We're glad to be able to host you in Beijing. I know you served here in the state department. [It was] your second posting, is that right?

Revere: My second posting in the foreign service was here.

Haenle: And what year would that have been?

Revere: Oh, a hundred years ago it seems! 1982 through '84.

Haenle: Ah, a different time in China. Very different.

Revere: Oh, amazing times to be here. [It was] the high tide of economic reform. Lots of amazing things were going on here. The place was really starting to move in a radically different direction, in a good direction. And [if] you look out the window of where we are sitting here, you can see the results of it all.

Haenle: Yeah, well it is a very different time. My first time was in the early '90s, and it is dramatically different from that period of time. And I look at pictures from the early '80s and it's just remarkable how much it has changed. Well, we're delighted to have you at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. Over the past few days, as a part of the 7th U.S.-China Track II Strategic Dialogue, you are meeting and discussing with various scholars, former government officials, views on the future of U.S.-China relations under the current Trump administration, but also approaching the 19th Party Congress and the leadership here in China. I want to talk to you about North Korea and the Korean Peninsula. This is obviously an issue that is front and center in the U.S.-China relationship. President Trump has put it there. He clearly has identified it as the most urgent issue to be addressed. You've talked this week about a frightening ramping up of North Korean missiles and nuclear capabilities over the past year. I often talk about the fact that at the end of the Bush administration, North Korea had conducted one nuclear test and a little more than a dozen missile tests. They are up to five nuclear tests now [and] almost a hundred missile tests if my data is correct—

Revere: Yes.

Haenle: —and that’s just over the course of the last 8-plus years. So, I really was struck by your comments this week, and I think our listeners would be interested in hearing your perspective on how you see this changing U.S. threat perception from North Korea.

Revere: Well, this year began, literally began, with a speech by Kim Jung-un in which he said very clearly that North Korea’s intention is to—in the not too distant future—be able to test an ICBM (inter-continental ballistic missile). And the implication of that was very clear—that the ICBM would be targeted at the United States. That was the game plan and the goal. And so, before President Trump ever took the oath of office, that was out there by the North Koreans. The North Koreans also made it clear—the North Korean leader made it clear in that statement—that this year would be a decisive year in the development of North Korea’s nuclear program. Meaning, I believe, that they would have fully developed the sorts of warheads that they would need to target the United States. So, as I wrote in an article just after that, “Welcome to the White House, President Trump! Here is the crisis that you’re facing.” And to his credit, he and his administration have taken on board the enormity of that threat [and] the imminence of that threat and made it one of the critical national priorities that it should be. And now the question is: “What do we do about it?”

Haenle: We saw some new missiles at the parade that they had this year.

Revere: Yes.

Haenle: You’ve talked about those missiles and why they’re significant. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Revere: [There are] two things that concern me. One was the missile tests that were conducted during the Abe-Trump Summit. [These were] solid-fuel, road mobile, easily moveable, [and] easily hideable systems. And the fact that they were launched during that summit [made] the message very clear to Japan and the United States: We have this new system, heretofore never tested, it worked [on its] first time out of the gate. These are nuclear-capable systems and they are capable of targeting Japanese population centers [and] Japanese military bases. But equally important, U.S. military bases in the Japanese archipelago. The North Koreans understand that if there were another Korean War, how critically important those bases and facilities would be to support that sort of contingency. And so, the message was very clear: We have the ability to reach out and touch you in the event of a conflict. The other system that worried me tremendously was the one that was just tested. Once again, [it was] a very high trajectory intermediate-range ballistic missile, the characteristics of which suggest that it was intended to target Japan and perhaps points beyond Japan as far away as Guam or the Midway. Once again, [these are] U.S. bases in the region that would be needed to support a contingency. But more importantly, maybe, if you look at the trajectory that that thing was launched on, it was launched almost vertically. And so, the idea was to get whatever the payload was out into space and see what happened to it on the way back down. The conclusion that I draw from that is that they were testing a re-entry vehicle that could eventually be used on an ICBM, because this is very difficult, sensitive, and complicated technology. You need to have a survivable warhead, and that may have been what they were

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testing. They made it very clear that it was a nuclear-capable system [and] I take them at their word. But if they are able to perfect that re-entry vehicle, that means they are that much closer, a *lot* closer, to developing the sort of warhead that you would need to put on a longer-range missile to hit the United States.

Haenle: Then how long? What's the estimate for their ability to get a nuclear warhead on top of this ICBM and range the United States, and how does that change the calculus?

Revere: Most experts believe that the North Koreans can already miniaturize nuclear warheads. That's an important step forward in technology [and] they can already do that. The one thing that we haven't seen yet is the re-entry vehicle, but they may have just tested that. We'll see. They already have the booster that they could use. It's the same one that they used to launch their two satellites into outer space. The last two times they have used that booster, it has worked. That is capable of putting an object out into space, which means that with some modifications, it's capable of carrying a warhead [for] intercontinental distances. And you marry that up with the shielded warhead that can survive the pressures of coming back through the atmosphere, and you've got a potential problem in terms of a new capability that the North Koreans have that can be used against the United States, perhaps within the next year or two.

Haenle: Under the Trump administration. So now we see a Trump administration that seems to be moving forward in a very urgent way to address this issue. How in your view has the U.S. changed its response to the North Korea threat? What do you think is the overall strategy in terms of pressure, and trying to get North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons?

Revere: You can see the change, the shift, in U.S. strategy, actually, at the very tail end of the Obama administration. After that fifth nuclear test, there was a real sea change in Washington. People realized that the nightmare day of when North Korea would be able to strike the United States with a nuclear weapon was moving that much closer. And so you started to see a rapid ramping up of sanctions and other pressures on North Korea. And building on that foundation, I think the Trump administration has taken a number of steps beyond that now, putting together an approach that is focused on applying a concentrated, overwhelming, unprecedented, and very comprehensive array of pressures on North Korea. [These are] in the economic realm, the banking realm, the economic and trade sanctions realm, [and] information operations. [It is] a very sophisticated package of measures that appear to be designed to send a message to the North Korean regime that we, the Trump administration, are going to put a level of pressure on you that you've never seen before and compel you to make a choice between continuing to go down the path that you're on, developing nuclear weapons. And if you do, this level of pressure could amount to the package of pressures that could destabilize the regime if we took it to its logical conclusion. So, the choice North Korea will have to make is: continue down this path and run the risk of instability in North Korea. Or, perhaps they'll blink and agree to come back to the negotiating table, [and] resume their denuclearization commitments that they undertook back in 2005 and 2007. I think the premise of this approach is that the one thing that North Korea values more—treasures, I think is a better word—treasures more than its nuclear weapons is its regime and the preservation of the regime. They have been developing nuclear weapons in their minds to maintain the regime. So, the message to them is the net effect of what you're doing is going to undermine the regime. And so, by applying this level of pressure—comprehensive, unprecedented,

overwhelming—you are sending a message to the leadership: You have to make this choice now. Nukes or survival, you can't have both.

Haenle: So, the Trump administration, one of the first two policy reviews it did was on North Korea. Coming out of that, in advance of Mar-a-Lago, you heard two things. One was [that the] preference is to do this with China. The second, though, was [that] if China's not willing to alter its strategy, its approach, and put more pressure on North Korea, then the U.S. would be willing to go at it alone. What would the U.S. administration do in terms of going at it alone?

Revere: Well, the U.S. is never going to go at it alone in the sense of not consulting with allies [or] not working with allies and partners. We've got a South Korean ally, [and] a Japanese ally... They are threatened just as we are threatened by these nukes. And by the way, I would include as allies and partners in this effort our friends in Europe, the Aussies, and others, all of whom have a similar stake with the United States in revolving this issue. Once again, the key is if we can get the Chinese on board, whatever we want to do is likely to be a lot more effective and is likely to really send that powerful message that Pyongyang needs to hear—that the international community is united in trying to deal with them. I've talked a lot about pressure. I've talked a lot about unprecedented steps that we could take in the economic and trade and other realms. But at the same time, I think it is really important that the Trump administration is reminding the North Koreans in its policy statements that there is an exit ramp here. That there is a carrot as well as the stick. The stick is a pretty big one. But the carrot remains. The United States has never taken off the table all of the commitments it made in 2005 and 2007 to North Korea. That's an important thing to remind the North Koreans, that at the end of the day, our goal is not the end of the regime. Our goal is to be able to work with, and somehow try to cooperate with, a non-nuclear North Korea. That was the goal back in 2005 and 2007. Here we are ten years later [and] that's still the goal. And that's important to remind the North Koreans.

Haenle: That September 19, 2005 joint statement is a very good document which charts a pathway—

Revere: Yes.

Haenle: —to get ultimately to a peace treaty and a normalized relationship with North Korea. But of course, it also involves giving up nuclear weapons on the North Korea side.

Revere: It does, but it also contains all of North Korea's desiderata, [which] are in there. They signed on to this because it contained all of the things that they want. Their checklist is in there as well. And every time I meet with North Koreans, and I meet with them quite frequently in Track II dialogues, I remind them of that. You know, this was your shopping list of things that were of concern to you. We signed on to it. And you signed on to denuclearization. And we regard that commitment as something that you need to return to and continue to implement in the future.

Haenle: Stepping out of the current picture of things, you made a great recommendation this week on a dialogue between the U.S. and China for a longer-term vision. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Revere: Yeah. At the end of the day, the North Koreans may decide that they want to be a nuclear weapons state in perpetuity, that they want to continue to create a bigger and bigger threat. A threat that has the potential to destabilize not only the Korean peninsula, but the region. That's not in our interests. That's not in South Korea or Japan's interests. It's certainly not in China's interests. I think the time has come for the United States and China and other countries to have what I have been calling for the last forty-something years as "the conversation." A conversation about what the Korean peninsula would look like if we were able to reunify the peninsula, [and] if we were able to ensure that a reunified Korean Peninsula did not have nuclear weapons, and that if that reunified Korean Peninsula did not pose a threat to anybody's security in the region...that's the kind of concept we ought to be working toward. My preference in the near term would be resolving this with North Korea, and bringing North Korea into the community of nations. But North Korea may not want to go down that path. And if that's the case, I think Beijing, Washington, Seoul, and other players in the region have an interest in—and maybe even an obligation to—have a conversation about an alternative future for the Korean peninsula in which we can figure out a way to reunify the Korean Peninsula. Peaceably, if possible. And reunify the country in a way that brings peace and a denuclearized atmosphere to the peninsula.

Haenle: My sense is that the U.S. side would be willing to have that conversation. I think our Korean friends as well.

Revere: I agree.

Haenle: How about the Chinese side?

Revere: I talked to many Chinese colleagues. A lot of them are former government officials, and they like the idea. They like the idea of an end state in which there is a reunified Korean Peninsula that doesn't pose a threat to them, that doesn't pose a threat to regional stability, that doesn't have nuclear weapons, [and] that gets along with its neighbors. The problem is, how do you get from here to there? You've got the not-so-insignificant problem of North Korea in the way. And is there a way to carry out a change of the regime, a change of the environment up there that results in reunification [and] doesn't involve violence? How do you get from here to there? That's hard. That's really, really hard. And it's not made any easier by the fact that the prevailing view at the top in Beijing is that it's better to have a problematic and even nuclear-armed North Korea than to risk chaos on the Korean Peninsula. That is a widely held view in the leadership here. Many of my Chinese colleagues feel that it's time to move beyond that view. But let's see what the leadership ends up deciding here.

Haenle: Well, Evans, thank you very much for joining us this week for the 7th Annual U.S.-China Track II Strategic Dialogue, but also for our China in the World podcast, and please come back again!

Revere: It's been a delight. Thank you very much for having me.

Haenle: That's it for this edition of the Carnegie-Tsinghua China in the World podcast. I encourage you to explore our site and see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. Thank you for listening. Be sure to tune in next time.

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