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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Jen Psaki**

Episode 96: The North Korean Nuclear

Threat: The View From Beijing

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Haenle: This week, the China in the World podcast features an interview between myself and Carnegie’s new vice president for communications and strategy, Jen Psaki—where we discuss the issue of North Korea. Jen served as White House communications director and spokesperson at the State Department, under then Secretary of State John Kerry, during the administration of President Obama. Our interview was recorded for Diplopod, a new podcast from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace which features commentary and analysis from Carnegie experts on critical global issues. If you haven’t already, I encourage you to head to the Carnegie Endowment’s website, or iTunes, and subscribe to the Diplopod. And of course, be sure to do the same for [the] China in the World podcast if you haven’t done so already. As always, thank you for listening to the China in the World podcast, I hope you enjoy our conversation.

Psaki: This is Jen Psaki, welcome to Diplopod. This is our second episode in a series about the dual nuclear threats of Iran and North Korea; today, we’re going to focus on North Korea. I’m thrilled to be joined by Paul Haenle, director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center in Beijing. Paul has a pretty lengthy and impressive resume [that] I’m not going to recite here, but one piece that I will mention is his work as the White House representative to the U.S. negotiating team for the Six-Party nuclear negotiations at the end of the Bush administration. Paul, welcome; [it’s] great to be speaking with you today.

Haenle: Thanks so much, Jen; I really appreciate you asking me to join your Diplopod.

Psaki: Thank you. Well, I’m going to jump right into it here, Paul. You’re in Beijing, you’ve served in Beijing quite a few times. What is the mood in China right now about North Korea? And can you explain to our listeners a little bit more about the different camps arguing— what they’re arguing for in terms of next steps, and who they are?

Haenle: Well thanks Jen; it’s a great question. In my time working on [the] North Korea issue I’ve not seen the level of frustration, in China, over the North Korea issue as high as I see it today. North Korea has taken a number of steps under the current leader, Kim Jong-un, to directly undermine China’s own interests— including their sixth nuclear test. Chinese citizens living in the northeast part of China were quite worried about potential radioactive fallout coming into the northern part of China. The sixth nuclear test that North Korea conducted was done precisely on the day where Xi Jinping was giving a keynote speech at the BRICS summit [Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa] that China was hosting, which is significantly important to China. So there— and recently Chinese scholars are talking about Kim Jong-un having sent in an assassination team to China to kill the son Kim Jong-un’s brother, Kim Jong-nam, which the Chinese do not appreciate. So, this has raised the level of frustration in China, but what we haven’t seen is a fundamental shift in policy in any dramatic way; to align more with the United States and put the kind of pressure on North Korea that the U.S. would like to see and thinks is necessary to get the North Korean leadership to change its political calculus and consider abandoning its program.

Psaki: And that was going to be my next question Paul. President Trump just finished a trip to Beijing and across Asia—is there overlap between what the United States defines as a solution to the crisis and what China defines as a solution? And has there been any change in that regard?

Haenle: Well, when President Trump was out here, there was joint language which was negotiated on the North Korean issue—and there is some overlap, and it’s important to sort of identify that it’s not that we’re completely at odds over this issue. There is overlap; on one, on process—the joint language that was negotiated agreed that both countries would work together to resolve the Korean Peninsula issue through dialogue. I think that’s the preferred sort of process that both the U.S. and China would like to undertake. In terms of the objective, the language was very clear, it said that the countries seek full verifiable and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula—this was the same language we used in the Bush administration; it indicates that neither China nor the United States will accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state. But there are different priorities, I think, by China and the U.S., and there’s a lot of distrust in the relationship that prevents us really from making the kind progress that we would hope to achieve. China puts stability really over all else; and in terms of the distrust, they’re worried that the United States really has an ultimate objective to overthrow the regime in North Korea, which China doesn’t see in its interests to do so. And then beyond that there’s other reasons why China is hesitant to fundamentally shift its policy on North Korea. There’s a historical relationship between the two countries—North Korea, they see, as a strategic buffer zone between China and U.S. ally South Korea. And then of course the ramifications of regime collapse and a humanitarian crisis—China doesn’t see that in its interests and it doesn’t, frankly, at the end of the day—and this is really important, people need to understand—China doesn’t want to turn its neighbor, North Korea, into its enemy overnight, especially as it reaches the point where it is going to obtain the capability, potentially, to put a nuclear device on a missile that could range countries in the region, maybe even the United States.

Psaki: So what has been the reaction—or what would be the reaction I should say—to military action on the Korean Peninsula, if the current United States administration—American administration—were to take that action?

Haenle: Well, that’s a great question because I think there’s growing concern in China over the debate in the United States on the question of military options. Many here in China think the administration has been making a case for war over the last several months under President Trump’s administration. And the issue of U.S. led military involvement on the Korean Peninsula is something that Chinese, I think most Chinese, view as not in China’s interest and something that they hope can be avoided. But there’s uncertainty right now about, I think, how China would react to military action on the Peninsula—in terms of whether it would remain neutral, and if a U.S. war in North Korea could serve China’s interest. Maybe some consider—if the war was costly to the United States, perhaps that’s to China’s strategic advantage. So, at the end of the day China is going to try to protect its own national interests. A major pillar of Xi Jinping’s program—make China great again—is building a modern military, which is capable of fighting and winning a 21st century war. And China hopes to be able to better defend its own country. I think the Communist Party would have to deal with the possibilities of domestic instability and the loss of Chinese lives, and deal with the humanitarian crisis that I mentioned before.

Psaki: So, Paul—and thank you for that very candid answer—I think a question would be—there’s agreement, as you said, that diplomacy is the right path forward, but we don’t have any knowledge of what actually is happening. So what more do you think the Chinese leadership

would be willing to do in terms of putting more pressure on North Korea in that regard? Would the Chinese leadership be willing to, say, take steps on their end that Trump and the U.S. administration is hoping for, like ending crude oil exports to the North Korean regime? Or is there more they would be willing to do?

Haenle: Well, this is something that, at Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, we’ve been engaging Chinese scholars on this question. And, the U.S. continues to call on China for increased pressure, cooperation, in dealing with the North. But, China hasn’t shifted its view in any—its approach—in any fundamental way, yet. We’re pushing, the United States is pushing to get China to consider cutting off oil to North Korea, and the Chinese, many Chinese, believe that [if] they cut off oil altogether, that in and of itself could lead to the collapse of the regime. What’s interesting about this question—and I think it’s an important point for our listeners to understand— which is, when we talk to the Chinese experts and government officials on this question of, are the North Korean’s approaching a Chinese red line—given all the things that North Korea has done to undermine China’s interests—are we getting to the point, potentially, where North Korean actions will cross a Chinese red line, and we’ll see a dramatically different posture emerge from China? And the answer is that experts and government officials are really looking at this question, and there are a number of scenarios that they believe might constitute crossing a red line. One, in fact, is potentially an atmospheric nuclear test over the Pacific Ocean, which the North Korean foreign minister at the U.N. in September, said North Korea was considering doing. Another is, any type of nuclear test where radioactive fallout would come into China and harm Chinese citizens. They’re very worried about the Yongbyon, the five-megawatt reactor, plutonium production reactor, which is about seventy miles from the Chinese border— it’s old, and they say if Japan, which is a modern country, advanced nation, can have nuclear safety issues, so can North Korea. And so they’re worried about their own people—and I think if something happens where Chinese people are, god forbid, killed or harmed, this could put pressure on the leadership in China to really take a tougher approach on North Korea. So, I think it’s important that—to recognize that—in fact, it is probably more likely that North Korean actions, and not Donald Trump’s tweets, or U.S. pressure, that’s going to get China to ultimately shift to a tougher position—its Kim Jong-un’s own actions and how that impacts China’s own national interests that I think will be the deciding factor.

Psaki: Interesting, Paul, and I want to touch a bit on your background. As I mentioned at the top of the podcast, you have served in Beijing before, you were part of the U.S. negotiating team at the end of the Bush administration. What would you, if you put your U.S. government hat back on, what would you be doing, what should the United States be doing now to address the threat of North Korea?

Haenle: Well, I think briefly, Jen—to that question, I mean, I think, we should have, the U.S. should have, two general focuses. One is this continuing to call for more pressure on North Korea from a united international community. This is, President Trump and the administration [have] been doing that—that’s not unique to President Trump. President Obama had the same approach, and President Bush tried the same thing. What’s unique about Trump, of course, [are] his tweets and that he gets out there and does things and says things that even his cabinet secretaries don’t know he’s going to do. But I think just the notion of more pressure on North Korea from the international community is something that we need to continue to do; but we also need to leave the

door open for negotiations—that’s the other half of it. Ultimately, I don’t believe there’s a good military solution to this issue. The administration is debating that, and, you hear Secretary Mattis talking about [how] they have military options that don’t have huge costs, or second and third order implications. I’m skeptical of that—I think that any military solution to this would come with huge costs to the United States and our allies in the region, and of course, China as well. So we do need to have some channel that is opened up so that if the pressure that we’re putting on North Korea does result in the North Korean leadership reconsidering their political calculus on this issue of their nuclear program, we have the channel and the platform to then begin to negotiate. And so, I think that it’s—China [is] going to play obviously a huge role, they can’t solve it for us, but we do need to figure out how to work with China and get them to put the kind of pressure on North Korea that will lead to that opening for negotiations.

Psaki: Have you seen from your perch Paul, and you know what the signals are even if the public doesn’t know something is happening, any indications that there are negotiations happening behind the scenes?

Haenle: Well, the United States and China do have Track II negotiations going on; the Trump administration has used what they call the New York channel, at times, to communicate with the North Koreans. The problem we’ve had, I think, is that every time the administration has gotten to the point where they say, we need to open this channel for negotiation, the North Koreans do something—whether it’s a nuclear test or a missile test, or something like sending our own American citizen, Otto Warmbier, home close to his death bed—and unfortunately he died after he got back. So, it’s hard, the environment then is difficult to create those channels for communication when the North Koreans continue to do these provocative steps. This leader, Kim Jong-un, is so different than his father. When I was the White House rep. to the Six-Party Talks, Kim Jong-il, his father, was the leader of North Korea. Kim Jong-un has put his country on a vastly different trajectory. At the end of the Bush administration, the North Korean’s had conducted one nuclear test and about seventeen missile tests. Under Kim Jong-un’s leadership they’re up to almost a hundred missile tests and now six nuclear tests. So, this is a very different challenge from when I was working on the issue; it’s a lot harder, frankly. I think the Trump administration and China and South Korea and Japan, we have a much more difficult challenge in front of us today with this particular leader.

Psaki: And just to wrap it up Paul - as you look back on the long history of negotiations on North Korea; are there mistakes you would look back and say were made through the process of negotiations—through any of the administrations? Should Bush not have pulled out of the Agreed Framework? Did we set unrealistic goals? Should Obama have done more? There’s a lot of ways to go with this, but from your perch...

Haenle: I think, in terms of the Agreed Framework, I think it was hard for the Bush administration to continue that after evidence was found that North Korea had been violating the agreement trying to acquire an HEU [Highly Enriched Uranium] program—which they apparently admitted to during a trip by a U.S. delegation to North Korea. The Six-Party Talks, I think, was a good framework for the time. China had a leadership role in that as the chair of the Six-Party Talks, and we were able to make some progress; you could argue how much progress was made, but at least, in many ways, we weren’t going backward—we were moving forward. We had U.S. teams in

North Korea, and we, I traveled myself as part of the U.S. team, five or six times to North Korea, during the—in the last two years of the Bush administration. If anything, we were learning about what North Koreans were thinking, we were bringing back certain things that helped from an intelligence standpoint. And so, we didn't solve the problem, obviously, but we did make some progress. And we have to remember that the reason the Six-Party Talks [are] no longer ongoing is because North Korea walked away—and they said, Kim Jong-un, under his leadership, we're not interested in the Six-Party Talk framework. So that's not really an option today, and they have violated so many of the agreements they made in the context of the Six Party Talks that it's really impossible to even consider coming back to that framework.

Psaki: Well thank you, Paul; you've certainly given us a lot to think about—and especially at such a timely moment with the trip of the U.S. president just completing. So, thanks for joining us today.

Haenle: Well thanks so much Jen, and I'm glad to one of the early guests on your new Diplopod—Carnegie Diplopod—and it's a real honor, so thank you very much.

Psaki: Thanks Paul.

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