

INTERVIEW: Leading Russian nuclear nonproliferation analyst discusses Korean Peninsula denuclearization with DPRK FM

PYONGYANG, November 22. /TASS correspondent Evgeny Agoshkov/. Anton Khlopkov, Director of the Center for Energy and Security Studies, has paid a three-day visit to Pyongyang, where he held a series of meetings with members of the DPRK expert community – including senior experts of the DPRK MFA Institute for American Studies. Mr. Khlopkov has told TASS about the outcomes of his Pyongyang visit and the Korean Peninsula denuclearization discussions.

Q: In the North Korean media coverage of your visit to Pyongyang, you are described as one of Russia’s leading nuclear energy and nuclear nonproliferation analysts. What was the purpose of the visit, whom did you meet, and what did you discuss?

A: We have maintained contacts with various DPRK research organizations for many years. Our main partner today is the Foreign Ministry’s Institute for American Studies. Also, our partners in that institute facilitate our meetings with other relevant institutes and departments of the DPRK MFA. That was our second meeting in Pyongyang this year. Also, we recently met in Moscow during a visit by the DPRK MFA delegation. These are regular contacts. Their goal is to give us a better understanding of each other and of the situation on the Korean Peninsula, as well as the broader Northeast Asian region. We are always eager to understand what hides behind the official wording of announcements following important events, such as the several summits held this year: the inter-Korean summits in Panmunjom and Pyongyang, and the US-DPRK summit in Singapore. Our visits to Pyongyang are an opportunity to touch base with our Korean partners, exchange opinions and try to understand how the situation may unfold in the months and years to come.

Stepping back from the brink

Significant progress has been achieved in the 10 months since the New Year Speech by Chairman Kim Jong Un. Late last year, we came very close to the line where a political confrontation degenerates into an armed conflict. The situation was like a tinderbox, ready to go up in flames at any moment. But in the past 10 months – thanks to the initiatives proposed by the DPRK, the South Korean willingness to support those initiatives, and US President Donald Trump’s readiness to become personally involved in that dialogue – we have stepped back from the brink. It is now important for everyone involved, including research organizations such as the think tank I represent, so understand how we can keep up the momentum. We need to figure out how to utilize to the fullest possible extent the potential of the positive changes in the region, in the North-South relations, and in the DPRK-USA relations.

Speaking of Russia’s interests, our country clearly doesn’t want to see the political conflict spiral into a military conflict. We are talking about a region just beyond our borders. There have been a number of examples in recent years of political and diplomatic efforts yielding practical results, and of military pressure proving unproductive. That is why our task is to get together and see what can be done,

exchange opinions, and come up with ideas on how to keep up the positive momentum.

Q: It is now very important for Russia and for the international community to understand the steps North Korea may undertake in terms of denuclearization. When, in your opinion, can we expect significant new steps towards nuclear disarmament by Pyongyang?

A: I believe that realistically speaking the nuclear issue cannot be isolated from the broader regional security context. It is no secret to anyone that the DPRK did not launch its nuclear program over 50 years ago on a whim, out of mere curiosity. They did it because they felt unsecured; they perceived a threat to their sovereignty. The summit in Singapore and the two inter-Korean summits have put that issue into its right context, which is the broader security context. The question is not just what the DPRK can do. It is also what other countries can do to reinforce the progress made on nuclear and other issues, and to prevent any backsliding.

Hope for another US-DPRK summit

If I am not mistaken, the Singapore declaration contains a paragraph that is very close to my own vision of how we should move towards denuclearization through new confidence-building measures. Clearly, the level of confidence between the key actors is very low. That cannot be changed overnight. Even a summit between the heads of state cannot change that, in and of itself. It takes time for every party involved to demonstrate through practical steps its willingness to work towards a comprehensive normalization, and towards resolving the whole host of problems that have been piling up for the decades. To that end, I hope there will be another US-Korean summit. I also believe that further progress in resolving the various ongoing crises in the region will require a multilateral format. Such a format is more sustainable, reliable, and promising – though dialogue between the USA and the DPRK will of course play the central role.

Synchronous steps

Another summit could make an important contribution to further progress. I would hope for more tangible measures as part of the agreement already reached at the inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang regarding the nuclear center in Yongbyon. During that summit, the DPRK said it would be ready to dismantle the Yongbyon facilities, in return for certain steps by the United States. I believe that Korean-US dialogue can help to convert that short but extremely important phrase from the Pyongyang Declaration into something more tangible and potentially leading to new agreements and new results on the ground, so to speak. In other words, there should be some reciprocal measures because, at the risk of repeating myself, any progress on this issue will have to be reciprocal. The trilateral communique following a meeting in Moscow between the Russian, Chinese, and DPRK deputy foreign ministers in October 2017 uses the word “synchronous”. I believe this phased and synchronous approach is very important for achieving further progress. There’s no point expecting just one of the parties to make all the effort while the others sit back and applaud. That would lead to no lasting result.

Q: Judging from North Korean media coverage, the DPRK leadership is now expecting reciprocal steps from the United States. In May, they destroyed the nuclear test tunnels at the Punggye-ri range, and they now believe that the ball is in the US court. First and foremost, they expect the West to take tangible steps on easing the international sanctions. But Washington thinks otherwise. Whose turn is it now to take the next step, in your opinion?

A: As far as I recall, almost all ball games are team games, with at least two teams taking part. And when the ball is in one team's court, the other team does not just sit and wait. It, too must work hard. So let us not oversimplify things by these ball comparisons. I believe efforts on both sides are required. But the DPRK has already sent a series of clear signals of its readiness to move forward. These include the moratorium on nuclear tests and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launches, as well as the return of the remains of US soldiers and the release of US citizens jailed in the DPRK. I should also mention the measures taken at the so-called northern nuclear test range (the Punggye-ri range – TASS). Meanwhile, the United States has essentially taken only a single step of major importance: it has put on hold large joint military drills with South Korea – and that's about it.

Impact of internal US politics

The US has a problem deciding what to do next. There is a realization that there will be no sustainable progress without reciprocity – but it's not clear how exactly that reciprocity will be achieved on the US side. This hold-up has much to do with internal US politics because the Trump administration has to make all foreign-policy decisions with an eye on the potential reaction by opponents among the Democrats as well as the Republicans. The next presidential election campaign is also getting close. As a result, the President's freedom of maneuver is beginning to shrink. On some issues, that freedom of maneuver may also be restricted by domestic political considerations and Trump's determination to be re-elected for a second term. The current US administration has yet to take any decision on sanctions. I believe that it is a mistake because if Washington is serious about achieving a Korean Peninsula settlement, including denuclearization, it must understand that no progress will be made without easing the economic restrictions on North Korea. Partial exemptions to facilitate specific cooperation projects are one of the options Washington might pursue. Otherwise, the situation will reach a dead end and the progress achieved in the past 10 months will be reversed. I am sure many people wouldn't want that. That would not be in Russian, US, or DPRK interests. And that is why Washington should make use of more creative and innovative approaches to the Korean Peninsula.

Q: What exactly is meant by North Korean denuclearization? Are we talking only of eliminating the nuclear weapons stockpiles? Or is the West also determined to have all the nuclear reactors dismantled, including those built during the Soviet period?

A: I believe the idea of North Korean unilateral denuclearization is utopian. It sets out the wrong goal. We should be talking about denuclearization of the entire Korean Peninsula. In that context, commitments must be undertaken on both sides. DPRK representatives have serious questions that require serious answers – including questions about the threat posed to North Korea by the United States. That includes the use of delivery systems in the region, the bombers and the submarines capable of

carrying nuclear weapons. If you have foreign planes and ships deployed close to your national borders, and you don't know what weapons these planes and ships carry, then all your military planning has to be based on the worst-case scenario. Clearly, the other side should also take steps in that situation. We are talking not just about the non-deployment of US nuclear weapons in the South, but about lifting the potential US threat more broadly.

Don't expect Pyongyang to capitulate

When we discuss verification at nuclear facilities, it's clear that inspections should be held on both sides. Washington and the South must understand that there's no point expecting a unilateral North Korean capitulation. Those who expect Pyongyang to capitulate – and some experts and politicians expect exactly that – are deluding themselves. Many have cherished such expectations for decades, but they have been proved wrong again and again. I believe all our further efforts should be based on the principles of reciprocity, respect for the national security interests of all parties, and equality. We should be discussing parallel measures by the DPRK, the United States, and South Korea because the latter is under the U.S. security umbrella. We should be thinking about joint simultaneous steps. Without such steps, any further progress would be extremely difficult.

Q: The nuclear research reactor which the Soviet Union built in North Korea in the 1960s is now thought to be very obsolete. Do you also believe it is genuinely obsolete, or has it been modernized by Korean specialists?

A: The DPRK has a research reactor supplied by the Soviet Union in the 1960s. In my opinion, there's no way that facility could be used for weapons purposes. It's a pool-type research reactor with a limited number of channels. I don't know what's going on at that facility at the moment. There's no information as to whether any research is still going on there. It may have already been shut down. But back in the 1960s and 1970s, North Korean specialists proved that they have the skills to upgrade that reactor. For example, using their own expertise, they converted that reactor from low-enriched to high-enriched uranium fuel. Because of the sanctions regime, North Korea may have problems securing access to some components and hardware, but the skills of the North Korean scientists are not in any doubt. Which is why I believe that if Pyongyang were to decide that the reactor should be upgraded, it will be upgraded.

Modern reactor safety technologies

But there's also the issue of new technologies, including reactor safety and automation technologies. At some point in the talks, it may be mutually beneficial to discuss nuclear safety issues and sharing best practice. That is especially relevant since according to some open-source reports, the DPRK is building a new experimental light-water reactor. The know-how that can be used for power generation, and understanding the safety measures than may be used in that reactor in view of the latest global trends, may be of mutual benefit.

Q: In your opinion, what are the prospects for peaceful nuclear energy use in the DPRK? How far off are the North Koreans from building their own nuclear power plant?

A: The DPRK is now heavily reliant on hydroelectric power. Hydroelectric power is cheap, but it depends on the water level. It is therefore in North Korea's long-term interest to diversify. Nuclear energy can be an element of such diversification. NPP projects were discussed back in the 1980s between the DPRK and the Soviet Union. The two countries signed a bilateral agreement in that regard, and North Korea even identified the site of the future NPP. They later hoped to build two nuclear power reactors as part of the Korean settlement – I am talking about the so-called KEDO project, under which reactors of South Korean design were to be built in the North using financing and assistance provided by an international consortium. In the current circumstances, international cooperation in this area is impossible because it would be in breach of UN Security Council resolutions.

DPRK right to peaceful nuclear energy

Peaceful use of nuclear energy should undoubtedly be on the agenda of any discussions about denuclearization and normalization in the region. That is an important principle that should be part of any settlement. Denuclearization does not mean a ban on the DPRK's exercising its right to peaceful use of nuclear energy. This is not an issue we'll have to decide today or even tomorrow – but in my view, any regional settlement should include a recognition of North Korea's right to peaceful use.