Ear to Asia podcast

Title: North Korea’s top defector speaks his mind

Description: Thae Yong-ho, North Korea’s highest ranking defector, joins us in the studio to share his unique insights into North Korean society and how it’s been shaped by the Kim family. He also sheds light on North Korea’s nuclear program, Pyongyang’s relations with the US and China, and what a more “positive” future for the Korean peninsula might look like. Presented by Peter Clarke. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

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Voiceover: The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

Peter Clarke: Hello, I’m Peter Clarke. This is Ear to Asia.

Thae Yong-ho: So look at North Korea. When Kim Jong-un announced the accomplishments of nuclear program, within one and a half years, he met President Trump three times, he met President Moon Jae-in four times, he met President Xi Jinping four times, Putin. So with these nuclear weapons, he almost entered the first rankings of the world global players.

Peter Clarke: In this episode, we talk with one of North Korea’s top defectors. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

In August of 2016, North Korea’s number two man at its London Embassy made the bold decision to step away from his duties and the authoritarian embrace of his country, to become one of Pyongyang’s highest ranking defectors. Until then, he was in the select company of North Korea’s elite, having the privilege of an overseas education, and enjoying an upward career trajectory in the diplomatic core of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, as North Korea is officially known. Now, residing with his family in South Korea, and ever looking over his shoulder for vengeance from Pyongyang, Thae Yong-ho is devoting himself to communicating the need for wholesale political change in North Korea, and an end to what he calls the slavery of ordinary North Korean people, under the rule of Kim Jong-un.
Thae Yong-ho's memoirs, titled Cryptography from the Third Floor Secretariat, were published in 2018, and quickly became a bestseller in South Korea. Thae Yong-ho is visiting Melbourne as a guest of Asia Institute, and joins us now to share his unique insights into North Korean society, and how it's being shaped by the Kim family. We'll also be exploring his views on North Korea’s nuclear programme, Pyongyang’s relations with the U.S. and China, and what a more positive future for the Korean peninsula might look like.

Mr. Thae, welcome to Ear to Asia.

Thae Yong-ho: Nice to meet you.

Peter Clarke: Good to meet you, as well. Let's start just by a very brief sketch of what that trajectory I referred to in the introduction, your personal diplomatic career, was actually like. I used the term elite a little moment ago. What was it like to be a member of the elite?

Thae Yong-ho: First of all, I was born in a very lucky family. Actually, my ancestors, my grandparents and my parents actually made a very good environment to be the elite of North Korean system. Actually, North Korea is the only country in 21st century where the population is divided into three main classes. So, the first, the ruling class is called core class, and the second is called wavering class, which is the majority of North Korean people, and the third one is called hostile class. I was lucky to be born in core class. That means that I could get a kind of privilege compared with the rest of the other people, to get good residence housing, to get a good education, good job after the education.

So, in a bit, I was lucky, and then second thing, I worked very hard to be a good diplomat. For instance, I passed good examination to enter English school when I was 14. I learned good English there, and later I was sent by the government to China to study, which is really a privileged education opportunity for me. So, that’s why, even though I was born in a good family, in the meanwhile, I worked very hard to be the diplomat of North Korea.

Peter Clarke: Hard work always helps, doesn't it? But you described a very good family. Take us further on how North Korean society is structured? I think it's called songbun, is that right?

Thae Yong-ho: Yes.

Peter Clarke: The way you describe it, how does one find oneself in a particular class?

Thae Yong-ho: First of all, I think, North Korea's very peculiar system in the world, first of
all, the actual idea, which controls North Korea, is a kind of hybrid from Marxism and also Confucianism, and a lot of the feudal elements inside, and even North Koreans decide to copy it, some of the elements from Christian, as well. So, the idea which was produced by Kim Il-sung was called *juche*, it is quite entirely a new different idea, and on base of this idea, North Korea has created quite a different social structures and political system apart from rest of the world, and even North Korea system is really peculiar even among communist estates.

**Peter Clarke:** That term you used we would probably translate as self-reliance, is that right? But it's more complex than that, isn't it?

**Thae Yong-ho:** Yes.

**Peter Clarke:** That's the tagline, if you like, the self-reliance.

**Thae Yong-ho:** Right, yes.

**Peter Clarke:** But its connotations go much deeper.

**Thae Yong-ho:** That's right. For instance, North Korea is the only country in the world which does not allow internet. In North Korea, there is not any space for difference. The people are taught to believe only one ideology, which was instructed by the Kim family. For instance, if you have different viewpoint or political ideas, then you would be either arrested or even sent to prison camps or even worse, you would be the subject of instant persecution. So, this is the system of North Korea. So, it's a really different system, which the world feels very difficult to understand.

**Peter Clarke:** Is it like a feudal system, essentially, a hereditary feudal system?

**Thae Yong-ho:** I would rather term it as a kind of similar like Dark Age in European history. For instance, the people in North Korea do not have even freedom, to move around. So, Pyongyang is their real built and beautiful city, but if you want to live in Pyongyang, you should have very good *songbun* or good background of your family, otherwise you can't live there. If there were a job opportunity in Pyongyang, you can't even move from your native place to Pyongyang. The people in North Korea are strictly constrained, and they cannot even move around.

In schools or universities, the people are taught to learn only one ideology, not the others. In North Korea, it is a kind of society where the leader is depicted as the father of the family while the Workers Party of Korea is a mother of North Korea, and the rest of the people are just treated as the minor of the family. So, that's why, when the leader is changed from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il, that means that the father is changed, and when the
father is changed from Kim Jong-il to present Kim Jong-un, the father changes, but this kind of structure of mother and the minors are not changed.

So, it’s a really peculiar feudal system, but in the meanwhile, the means of the productions are all socialised and nationalised. So, in North Korea, you do not have even ownership of your apartments where you’re living, you don’t have any ownership of property, or land, or whatever. So, the people are deprived of any rights of the ownership.

Peter Clarke: As a member of the elite, though, and certainly as a budding diplomat, you must have had more access to outside information, to more analytical type of education information. As that happened to you personally, were you aware of the beginning of disconnects in your own mind?

Thae Yong-ho: Yes. I was posted in Denmark firstly, in 1996, when I was 34, and that was my first post. But when I arrived in Copenhagen, I saw quite a different world from which I was taught. I was taught, in my years of education, that in capitalist world, the streets are full of beggars and homeless people, the capitalist’s mercilessly exploit its population, the richest gets richer and the poor gets poorer, but I arrived in Denmark, I saw a very ample social welfare system. Their social welfare system was much better than North Korea’s, but I was taught that North Korea is the only socialist paradise in the world, but I compared the Danish and North Korea, Danish was much better. That is the start of my confusion and even suspicion of North Korean and system and ideology and all of these things.

Peter Clarke: A liberal city like Copenhagen in Denmark, as a first posting, was quite an extraordinary one, to create that sort of contrast. Let’s go to 2016, when you finally did cross the Rubicon, actually defected. Could we describe it now, in retrospect, as a last straw moment? Or was there a buildup, an accumulation of dissent in your mind?

Thae Yong-ho: Oh, it’s a little bit along process of evolution. I was posted twice in London. I served from 2004 to 2008, with my children, and my last term was from 2013 until 2016. So, in these two terms, not only me but my sons also, they entered to British education. So, when I served first in London, my first son was in high school, my second one was in primary school. Even though they had a British education, actually, they were young to understand the concepts of freedom, democracy, of all these things. But when I went to London again, in 2013, my second son was already in the last years of the high school, my first son was already in university. Now, they start understand and they start to compare the two systems, and they asked me a lot of questions in our private family dinner table, like why there is no YouTube or internet system, why they fabricate all these false news to brainwash that people. So, I have to be very honest to my sons.
So, as long as I'm concerned, I actually endured all these very conflicting beliefs in my mind, but when I saw that my sons learned these two different world when they were young, and every three or four years, my family switched from free and democratic world to most totalitarian world, and after another three or four years, we switched from the hell to paradise. So, it always switch between freedom and totalitarian system. So, at last, how can I continue this kind of double life? My sons are all grown-ups now. It could be very miserable for them to live in North Korea while they have already full knowledge of concepts of human rights, freedom, democracy, of all these things.

So, I really had, you know, really mercy on them. So, if I do not cut off the chain of slavery at my generation, then my son. and even further, my grandchildren, they would lead the same life as I did, so that's why I thought that as a father, it is my mission to cut off this chain of slavery at my generation.

Peter Clarke: So, now, looking back, and just looking at yourself today, loyalty as a concept, and as a practice sits right at the heart of the North Korean system. How do you view loyalty today, as an idea and as a practice?

Thae Yong-ho: North Korean system can only be in place by prevention of outside information to its people. This system can only be maintained by reign of terror. For instance, Kim Jong-un even persecuted his uncle and his half brother. So, the people are just terrified in North Korea. So, for North Korean citizens, to show a kind of loyalty to the leadership is the matter of life and death. So, that's why there's no choice, but everyone should pretend to be loyal to the leader and the system.

Peter Clarke: I guess most of us have imbibed Orwell to some degree, so we're imagining a society where people don't trust even their nearest and dearest. Is that the sort of society that you experienced early on?

Thae Yong-ho: Yes, that's right. I didn't have that kind of problem with my wife because we spent together in European countries quite a long time as diplomat family. So, my wife fully understood the freedom, democracy, and those basic concepts of the free world, but the rest of North Korean people, they were brainwashed in their times, and that's why they not open their minds to their dearest, and they're afraid of being reported to the security system, by opening their minds to their nearest. So, that's why, in North Korea, the people actually do not open their minds very easily, to the other people.

Peter Clarke: What's it like for a former North Korean living now in South Korea? For example, are you easily identified by your accent, your dialect? Do people pick you as a North Korean?
Thae Yong-ho: I am very careful and cautious, because I am the number one of the assassination of North Korean regime. So, I am really heavily protected by South Korean government. My freedom is very much restricted. But in the meanwhile, I do understand that in order to let the rest of North Korean people enjoy the same freedom as I'm enjoying, I have to do something, so I am very active in South Korea and worldwide, to persuade the South Korean population and the world to make a change in North Korea, so that North Korean people one day will be finally freed from that kind of tyrant and totalitarian system.

Peter Clarke: Is there a mixture of responses to you personally within South Korea? Are some people angry with you in some ways, deeply mistrustful of you?

Thae Yong-ho: Yes, many people in South Korea are angry at me, because South Korea is a very much polarised, the political debate between the right and the left are very severe, and some people in the left group think that the current North Korea could be the dream of the equality or whatever. So, that's why North Korea, they termed me as a human scum or traitor, so that's why some people in South Korea, even, think that I'm the traitor of the socialist cause.

Peter Clarke: What we're seeing at the moment in Hong Kong, which is quite extraordinary, is partially attributable to young people within the schools, they're having a much more liberal education than their counterparts on the mainland in China. Putting a spotlight on the young people in North Korea, the millennials, if you like, what are they like? Is there any breakthrough just from their natural youthful interest in other things, or are they so locked down by the process of propaganda and the ideological education in North Korea that they're not really thinking very outside the square.

Thae Yong-ho: Oh, the current young generation in North Korea is quite different from their parents' generation. In North Korea, we call it a third generation of North Korean system, and this generation is called *jangmadang* generation. The current young generation has not seen the peak of North Korea's socialist welfare system. I am different. When I was born and when I was in 10s or 20s, I saw the peak of North Korea's socialist welfare system. When I was young or university student, the ration system was working, my family can make ends meet with my parents' salary.

But the current North Korea's quite different. When I was in North Korea, my monthly salary was only 0.3 U.S. dollar. So, with that month’s salary as a diplomat in Pyongyang, you can't even afford to buy one kilo of rice. So, the whole population of North Korea are not dependent on the pay by the government, so that's why they look for a black market, or *jangmadang*, capitalist market, so they have either two or three jobs. The society is very
much corrupted.

So, young generation is looking for something new. That is the reason why, even though there is very strong measures to prevent outside informations, but still, very massive smuggling of South Korean movies and dramas to young generations to North Korea. So, the young generations in North Korea are really heavily suppressed by the system, but actually in their minds, the demand for a change, demands for information about the world, is also growing.

Peter Clarke: The real comparisons, I guess, in everybody’s minds, is they listen to you with the history of China, too, with moving to that very capitalistic model, hyper-capitalism, really, but still with total central command. Are there prospects in North Korea as you see it for that younger millennial generation who seem to be motivated by materialism and perhaps by some abstract notion of additional freedoms, is it up to them now to force the pace towards that aspiration of capitalism?

Thae Yong-ho: I think so. If we look back the communist world of the other countries like what happened in Soviet Union, or Eastern European countries, the changes were only available at a third generation. For instance, Gorbachev, who brought the reform of Soviet system, he was the third generation. But if you look at North Korean leadership, Kim Jong-un is the only one in 30s, he is the only one who belongs to third generation of North Korean system. Around him, the leaders who are the close associates of Kim Jong-un are still the second generation of North Korean system.

Peter Clarke: They look like old men.

Thae Yong-ho: That’s right. If you look at the current China, Xi Jinping is the second generation of China’s system. So, it is very difficult to bring a kind of change when the second generation are in power. So, that’s why I am looking forward to days when the third generation of the system are in full power in every aspect.

Peter Clarke: The images we receive from North Korea are very rare, very limited, very constricted, but we see almost a parody of support for the supreme leader. So, Mr. Thae, do you think the average North Korean actually supports the supreme leader or just tolerates him?

Thae Yong-ho: First of all, North Korean population has been living under the current system for over several decades, so they are used to this kind of daily routine of their lives. So, it is really hard to say whether they strongly believe in the leader or the system or not, but what it is very clear to them that the system could not solve any problems for them. That’s why the black market and the capitalist elements are growing, even though the
government and the regime strongly oppose it. So, these kind of two contradictions are meeting each other in North Korea. That’s why, I think, when this third young generations grow up, and then they are in 30s or 40s, and in power, in every North Korean administrative, then I think they really want make some changes, I think.

Peter Clarke: You’re listening to Ear to Asia, from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I am Peter Clarke, with our guest, Thae Yong-ho, a former North Korean diplomat now living in South Korea. Let’s throw the spotlight on this Kim dynasty. What conditions were right to allow a dynasty to emerge in the first place, back in the 40s, I guess, and then flourish and grow, and get such a tight grip on the North Korean people?

Thae Yong-ho: As I have said, Kim Il-sung clarified that North Korean population be divided into three classes. That is the system which Kim Il-sung copied from feudal Yi dynasty of Korea. So, if the population of the society is divided in this three major group of society, then the core class, I mean the leading class, of that society, always are interested in maintenance of the system, because they receive privileges and economic benefit. So, that is how Kim family succeeded in that kind of dynasty system.

Peter Clarke: What are the rough percentages of those three classes?

Thae Yong-ho: The core class is around from 15-20%, and the hostile class is around 15-20% as well, and the majority is the wavering class. The trick is that Kim family gives kind of an opportunity to go up to wavering classes, so there is a very strong competition or contest inside the wavering class to get rid of their class, to reach the core class. So, some of them want to be extremely loyal, but on the meanwhile, when if you fail to be loyal to Kim family from core class, then you would be immediately expelled from core class to the hostile class. So, in North Korea, there is continuation of successive persecution among core class. So, when Kim Jong-un persecute the cadres from the leaderships, their families are either sent to prison camps or the remote countryside. So, these kind of frequent changes inside core class and wavering class is one of the ways to keep the society going on, but the question is how long Kim Jong-un rely on this kind of the control system.

Peter Clarke: Kim Jong-un was not the oldest son? How did he attain power?

Thae Yong-ho: As I said, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il had already made that kind of system in advance. They think that the Kim family is the only one who can tell the truth, who can see the future of North Korea, so inside North Korea, people regard the member of Kim family as a god. So, when Kim Jong-il appointed his last son to be the successor, actually, there was not any strong or open protest for this kind of continuation, and the system in North Korea, there is not any free election, there is no opposition. So, if
one person of supreme leader decides, then everyone is expected to follow. So, this is the system how it works, so Kim Jong-un has become the successor of North Korea without any opposition from the system, from the leaders, or even inside the family.

Peter Clarke: Did you anticipate some changes, some improvements even, in the way North Korea was led when he took power?

Thae Yong-ho: Yes. I had really great expectation. He was educated in Switzerland, I thought that he knew a lot of Western culture, democracy, and human rights. As the third generation of Kim family, he may try to make some changes in North Korea. So, not only me but my colleagues as well, they had really high expectations. But our and my expectations faded away, when he decided to continue the line of finishing the nuclear programme of his grandfather and his father, in March of 2013. So, Kim Jong-un has chosen the policy of continuation and tradition, rather than change, and Kim Jong-un knows very well that if he tries a kind of reform or change in North Korean system, which is a little bit different from what his grandfather or his father did, then it could really risk his control over North Korean society. So, that’s why not only me but the people's expectation on him started to fade away.

Peter Clarke: What is the greatest threat to his dictatorship?

Thae Yong-ho: I think the greatest threat was the legitimacy, to be the next leader of North Korea. North Korea is very Confucius society, so it is a kind of long established concept that if someone succeeds the family business, then it should be the first son of the family. But Kim Jong-un is the last son of the family. But North Korean people do not know that there was a first son Kim Jong-nam, there was second son Kim Jong-chui, but nobody knows because these children of Kim Jong-il were kept totally secret inside North Korea. But Kim Jong-un knows, and the high rankings of the leadership knew that he was the last son. So, that is his most dilemma. North Korean news people say that he is the only successor of that blood line, but is he? No. That was the first and biggest threat to his leadership when he came to power at the first few years.

Peter Clarke: One can only imagine what the jostling, the rivalries are like within the military elite in North Korea. What is the bedrock reason why they continue their loyalty and support of Kim Jong-un?

Thae Yong-ho: First of all, I think it is worth to notice that there is a frequent change of highest ranking generals in North Korea. Every year, the highest rankings of North Korean generals are changed from one post to that post. So, this proves that Kim Jong-un still has a great fear of these army generals. These army generals are under very heavy surveillance system. Even the army
generals even can’t carry a pistol with them. They are afraid of being persecuted at any moment. For instance, the former chief of general staff of North Korean army was persecuted, the defence minister of North Korean army was persecuted, so these army generals in the top rank knew quite well that they could be the next instant subject of persecution. So, everyone is afraid, that’s why they want to pretend or even show the highest level of loyalty to Kim Jong-un in order to survive.

Peter Clarke: What’s Kim Jong-un like as a man?

Thae Yong-ho: Oh, in a word, he is intelligent but also merciless. He was educated in Switzerland, so he understands very well the influence of the media in democratic world. Meanwhile, he knows how to use the power of terror whenever he feels any kind of threat, he immediately act to remove that threat from his sight. So, he is a man with intelligence and also mercilessness.

Peter Clarke: Which intelligence apparatus do you believe has the deepest coverage, North Korea on Donald Trump, or Donald Trump’s intelligence apparatus on North Korea?

Thae Yong-ho: I think North Korea has more strong intelligence informations about Trump, and North Korea is a closed society. That’s why it is very difficult in read what’s going on inside North Korea. But from North Korea’s perspective, America is very easy to be read. All newspapers are saying, all politicians are saying, all experts are saying, so for North Korea it is very easy to make a plan with President Trump, while actually, America does not have any detailed informations about Kim Jong-un and his regime.

Peter Clarke: So, when Kim Jong-un invited Donald Trump to cross the border in that last meeting, he knew he’d come.

Thae Yong-ho: Of course, because if you see North Korea compared with China, North Korea is exactly following the steps of the former Chinese leaders did. For instance, China want to make an equal relationship with America in 50s and 60s, but America never accepted China as a global player. So, Mao Zedong, he succeeded in hydrogen bombs in 1967, and it took only two years for America to change their policy. So, in 1969, then President Nixon, he announced a Nixon Doctrine, which actually accepted the China as a global leader. President Nixon visited China in ’72. He stepped his first foot on China only when China succeeded in nuclear bombs.

So, look at North Korea. With this nuclear weapons, Kim Jong-un entered premier league with the help of President Trump. Kim Il-sung tried very hard to be equally treated by Americans but failed. Kim Jong-un’s father, Kim Jong-il, he tried very hard to invite American presidents to the summit,
but American presidents only visited North Korea after they retired from their presidency. Jimmy Carter, Clinton visited, but when they were just a normal person. But when Kim Jong-un announced the accomplishments of nuclear programme in November of 2017, within one and a half period of time, he met President Trump three times, he met President Moon Jae-in four times, he met President Xi Jinping four times, Putin. So, with this nuclear weapons, he almost entered the first rankings of the world global players.

Peter Clarke: Is that the reason that Kim Jong-un is so obsessed with long-range ballistic missiles?

Thae Yong-ho: Yes, that’s right. He think that if he only relies on short or medium missiles, he cannot enter that premier league. Only the countries with nuclear and ICBMs can enter the premier league.

Peter Clarke: We’ve seen the public bromance between Kim Jong-un and President Trump of the United States, and we’ve seen the kabuki of their gatherings in North Korea, or in South Korea, in the demilitarised zone there. How do you assess the actual versus the apparent concessions made by either side to the other?

Thae Yong-ho: I haven’t seen any concessions from Kim Jong-un, but I saw great concessions from American side. First, North Korea has got this nuclear and ICBM over one year and half, but America has not even escalated its economic extension against North Korea. America is still signalling that they are ready for any kind of dialogue with North Korea. America president said that denuclearization of North Korea would take quite a long time, he’s not in hurry to make any denuclearization process happening in the near future. So, actually, North Korea succeeded in buying time with this nuclear weapons, and to my impression, President Trump is not actually interested in denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. He is only interested in re-election of his presidency, and he is looking for any kind of opportunity to make a very good use of this North Korean nuclear issues for his second presidency.

Peter Clarke: There was real contrast in the comments between Donald Trump and Abe, the prime minister of Japan, at the G7. In fact, there was complete disagreement, really, in rhetorical terms. Japan, where do they fit into all this?

Thae Yong-ho: Japan is very near to North Korea. So, North Korea's short and intermediate nuclear missiles are direct to Japan. But those remarks from President Trump's in the last few months were really a surprising, because President Trump’s indicated that as long as North Korea keeps a moratorium on ICBM, then it's okay. That means America had already
drawn a new red line, which tells the North Koreans that as long as you do not threaten America then it’s okay. That means, what about, then, America’s allies’ security in Northeast Asia, countries like Japan or South Korea? So, that’s why I think Prime Minister Abe is a little bit upset of these kind of attitudes by President Trump.

Peter Clarke: How do you see the relationship between North Korea and China today? Is Xi Jinping actually the puppet master?

Thae Yong-ho: I think China now feels more intensified American threat in this region, but on the meanwhile, vice versa. America is not happy with growing Chinese power in this region as well. So, in the long term strategy, China regards North Korea as a kind of bumper zone to check and prevent the escalation of American power in this region. How can China make North Korea kind of bumper zone? They think that nuclear weapon can contribute to some extent to keep the current North Korean system to play as a kind of bumper zone for China. So, that’s why China is not enthusiastic in carrying out those economic UN sanctions, which China promised to do.

Peter Clarke: Can peace come to the Korean peninsula, as we imagine it anyway, without China?

Thae Yong-ho: I think it’s really difficult, because when there is strong pressure, and when North Korea’s pushed to tight corner, always China reaches out its hand of help. So, if China continues to play this kind of game in the context of playing game with Americans, then I think it’s really difficult to bring any true solution of denuclearization of North Korea.

Peter Clarke: How can North Korea exist without China?

Thae Yong-ho: It’s almost impossible, because North Korea is the only one country in the world which heavily relies on one country. 95% of North Korea’s foreign trade only relies on China. So, if China cuts off these trade relations with North Korea, North Korea cannot survive.

Peter Clarke: How do you assess the current attempts at rapprochement from South Korea towards North Korea?

Thae Yong-ho: So far, rapprochement didn’t work very well. For instance, in the last August, Kim Jong-un conducted even five times of short range missiles, and Kim Jong-un was not happy with the current South Korean government’s policy of sanctions. On the meanwhile, South Korean government wants to improve its relations with North Korea, but they are tied by the framework of UN sanctions. So, there is really very little that South Korean government can do for inter-Korean relations.
Peter Clarke: Let's think future now. Firstly, the re-shaping of North Korea itself. There are models in the region, aren't there, for a shift to more capitalism, etc. Do you anticipate that may eventually emerge, either during the dictatorship of Kim Jong-un or beyond?

Thae Yong-ho: Kim Jong-un is looking for a kind of new model of future North Korea's economic structure. He does not want to copy the Chinese or Vietnam style, but he wants to copy kind of isolated and restricted special economic zone style, which is now in place in DMZ Kaesong area. Kim Jong-un has already announced that he would develop 14 special economic zones inside North Korea, and now Kim Jong-un is building tourist resort in Kalma Peninsula, near towards our city, which is totally isolated from the rest of North Korea. So, he wants to make a kind of isolated special economic zones in some part of North Korea, and let foreign investments in, so that he can earn foreign currency with the help of cheap North Korean labour force.

Peter Clarke: Mr. Thae, in your view, what are the greatest challenges to bringing North and South Korea together?

Thae Yong-ho: I think, first of all, South Korean politics must approach a very honest policy towards North Korea. Nowadays, the North Koreans in South Korea is too much polarised, so that's why South Korean government cannot exert its strength to make a change inside of North Korea. And then second thing I think the world should try to disseminate much informations inside North Korea. I think education is the most important thing for the North Korean population. We should smuggle in more informations about the world, the new concepts of freedom and democracy, so that the people inside North Korea must be educated. Otherwise, you see, if they are staying in the current brainwashing system of North Korea, then we can't expect any change.

Peter Clarke: Final question, and it's a personal one. Taking it back to 2016 when you stepped off the cliff, and looking back today, what are your deepest regrets?

Thae Yong-ho: My deepest regrets is that I could not tell in advance about my plan to my dear friends and my relatives in North Korea, for instance, I couldn't tell my secret plan of my defection even to my friends working together in my London embassy. I couldn't tell my plan to my nephews or cousins. If I told them in advance, they could have feel real good preparations, but North Korea, you can't tell this kind of secret plans even to your dearest. So, actually, my defection brought a lot of sacrifice to my dear friends and relatives, and I really do regret for that.

Peter Clarke: The price you've paid, of course, is that daily apprehension, I suppose, of
assassination. How do you deal with that daily?

Thae Yong-ho: First of all, whenever I move around or whenever I walk the streets, whatever, I make some disguise like what I did, these caps, and then the sunglasses. I seldom talk with the people who pass us by. I have a little bit different Korean accent. So, I have to be very cautious and careful not to be seen by the people, and I always move around with my bodyguards. I try my best.

Peter Clarke: Mr. Thae, we appreciate your being with us today on Ear to Asia. Thank you.

Thae Yong-ho: Thank you very much.

Peter Clarke: Our guest this time, Thae Yong-ho, the former North Korean diplomat who defected to South Korea in 2016.

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