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Transcript

Life in the Hermit Kingdom

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LIFE IN THE HERMIT KINGDOM

Paddy O'Connell:

Good evening. I'm your chairman this evening, Paddy O'Connell. I'm delighted to welcome Jihyun Park, next to me – hello, Jihyun. Next to Jihyun is Sue Min [phonetic], who will be translating as appropriate. Before we meet the other two panellists, can you just indicate, so we can meet you, who is a Korean speaker in the room? Two. That's why we're the experts, you see. We look forward to help from you perhaps as well. Next we have John Swenson-Wright, senior consulting fellow here on the Asia Programme. We have John Sweeney with us, to show us clips from his documentary, *North Korea Undercover*. We were due to have James Jones, but he's in Ukraine – another country where a thin line separates two powerful neighbours. So he's not going to be with us tonight.

If I could just explain how we'll run it: we'll run three clips and we'll ask for audience and panel interaction after each clip. Then at seven, we'll have a debate over two topics, which are: is the regime stable or unstable? And, is there a desire for change in the regime? But for the first half-hour or so, we'll enjoy these film clips and we'll talk about them.

So John, if I can welcome you, what are we going to see first? You've brought something with you.

John Sweeney:

It's simply the news cut-down, which is 2:30, something like this, for BBC News, which is simply the best bits of our controversial eight-day trip. As we all know, a complaint was made to the BBC Trust and that is still continuing, almost a year after we went there. I would say – of course, wouldn't I – that nothing happened to anybody, and we heard later that the guides were safe and working. Nevertheless, there were bigger issues around that. All we tried to do was to get a flavour of what life was like in North Korea at the time, when Kim Jong-un, the new kid on the block – the new Kim on the block – was threatening thermonuclear war against the United States. And to see really in a sense, just how credible was the regime, what it said, and so forth.

Paddy O'Connell:

Okay, and we'll come to Jihyun and the rest of the panel, and to you, as soon as we've seen this. So let's have a first look at three minutes of *North Korea Undercover*.

[film clip]

John, I'll come to you in a moment, if I may, because it seems respectful and perhaps informative to come to you first, Jihyun Park. John portrays the poverty, the scarcity. When you left North Korea, what do you remember firsthand about your friends, your family's ability to get healthcare, to get food, to get consumer products?

Jihyun Park [via translator]:

I left North Korea in the late 1990s. The North Korean economy started to slow down from the early 1990s. That's when the factories started to stop and rations started to dwindle. It got delayed by two or three years, the rationing. We were forced to give up our rations to the military as a form of donation, so many people starved. As for the hospitals, people didn't go to hospitals that often because they wouldn't give us medicine and we were not able to find medicine from pharmacists. So we had to go to market and find medicines by ourselves. Therefore, we didn't go to hospitals.

Paddy O'Connell:

Thank you. I think it's very important for us to have that firsthand as we begin. John Swenson-Wright, this picture of a starving, sometimes sick people – is it what we want to hear? What about all the people who are healthy and are being fed? They presumably feed the military. So what's the picture you would pick out about conditions in the country – not the politics, the stomachs and the minds?

John Swenson-Wright:

I think, as this demonstrates, there is a gap between what the state wants to represent and the reality on the ground. A lot of the imagery of that poverty is an accurate reflection of the difficulties throughout the country. There's a huge difference between the sort of images we see in Pyongyang, which in some ways is a monumental city designed to present the best positive face – if there is such a thing as a positive face of North Korea – to the outside

world. There's no doubt that the impact of the 1990s' natural calamities plus the failed system of economic management – or mismanagement – have imposed real pressures on North Korea. But things have, to some extent, improved in some areas. In some areas there has been improvement.

Paddy O'Connell:

John, you told me, as we came in, of markets, of contraband goods. Can you give us a flavour of that, as a Westerner, what you were seeing traded?

John Sweeney:

The latest bit of information which I like is that Chinese-made shortwave radios – there's been a crackdown on South Korean DVDs, of soap operas, whatever. As a result of that crackdown, the new thing is Chinese-made shortwave radios which can pick up Voice of America, Radio Free Asia and South Korean stations, because people are hungry for news. They've gone up in price, these radios, inside North Korea, to 9 quid a radio. Nobody in their right mind will ever spend 9 pounds to listen to North Korean state radio. That means they're hungry for honest news. Again, it's a little chink in the information ice wall.

Question 1:

John's clips brought back memories of a trip I made to North Korea two years before.

John Sweeney:

It's the same trip.

Question 1:

It wasn't quite the same trip but certainly most of the images you showed were very familiar. Picking up John Swenson-Wright's point, yes, Pyongyang is supposed to be something of a model. But nevertheless, even in Pyongyang there is the most appalling deprivation, when you see the thousands of people walking every morning to get to work. The thing that really struck me – John reminded me – I went in March and it was freezing cold inside, even government ministries. One thing in the clip which puzzled

me: how on earth did you get an iPhone in? Because when I went in Pyongyang, every visitor had their mobile phones seized and kept at the airport.

John Sweeney:

New change of rules: everybody brought their iPhones in. Remember, I was with a group of students, although we didn't refer to that in the film. All of them had every single piece of electronic media wizardry. There's a kind of opening up a little bit. Remember, Kim Jong-un spent time in Switzerland. There are kids rollerblading, all of that stuff is going on. So it's a weird situation at the moment. But people could bring their iPhones. Of course they didn't work for the whole of North Korea, because there is no possibility of using a phone outside. But we could get a signal in the very south of North Korea.

Paddy O'Connell:

I wonder if I could get people in the room to turn their attention to the south. There is evidence, from over-schooled children who have no spare time, that children in the south are born into a state that was run by a dictator; they're plugged into the internet from the age of six months old. They're very driven, they have hardly any spare time. They're not all happy. They may have lots to buy in the south, but I wonder if we've got one peninsula with huge polar opposites, where the lack of everything in the north – they may have lots of stuff in the south, John, but is it good for them? Are they loving it? Are they happy?

John Swenson-Wright:

Levels of suicide in South Korea are at a relatively high level. The pressure of education is undoubtedly challenging. I think the most interesting thing is, when you talk to young people in South Korea, how few of them see their relationship with the north as a relationship with their fellow countrymen. Twenty years ago, South Korean students saw the north as part of a common heritage. One of the big issues at the moment is the likelihood of unification – and the South Korean president has given renewed attention to the possibility of unification – yet in some ways, generationally, she's out of kilter with those young people who now recognize the costs that unification would entail, and feel that the north – in terms of its political ideology, in terms of its way of life

– is really a foreign country. That doesn't minimize the difficulties that they face as modern citizens.

Paddy O'Connell:

It must be very stressful. We were talking about why we're missing one panellist, who's in Ukraine, and we know what the Crimean story is. But if you're living all your life with a demilitarized zone 20 miles away and someone who's regularly firing missiles into the sea, there must be a lot of stress – obviously in the north, but there must be a lot of stress in the south.

John Swenson-Wright:

I would say not, at least – if you think back to last year, March and April, when we had one of the north's familiar provocations. That was the first time that many people in Seoul – I was there at the time – began to feel anxious about the challenge from the north. But the fact that they've lived with that challenge for the best part of half a century has meant that they discounted a lot of that.

Paddy O'Connell:

Okay, one of our Korean speakers in the audience. I hope you're not going to call us to account already.

Question 2:

I just wanted to say a couple things. While I was watching that video, I thought Pyongyang – the outside of Pyongyang – it looked exactly like Seoul about 30 years ago. That's what struck me, to see how the West sees North Korea as a threat, if that makes any sense at all. Also secondly, when you said South Koreans and the young South Koreans – as a young South Korean, I don't necessarily feel stressed or threatened by the existence of North Korea at all. It's maybe because it's something that we live with. North Korea is firing missiles every day these days, and it's on the news, and no one really seems to care. My parents never really say anything – whenever I speak to my mom, she never really says anything like, North Korea has done this and that, did you hear about this?

Paddy O'Connell:

Jihyun Park, could you respond to why we see the north as a threat, when they're a bunch of technology that's 30 years old and no lights and no food. Is it all down to weapons? Why is the West so obsessed with the threat when they're living in 30 years ago?

Jihyun Park:

[in Korean]

Paddy O'Connell:

We'll just have the flavour of that, if you don't mind. She didn't answer the question? I thought that was just a problem we had with the English speakers. Save it for a moment, we need to watch the second clip. You can discuss this in just a second. Did you get the flavour of it, here in the audience? Did you hear what was being said there?

Question 2:

Kind of, but it was very descriptive.

Paddy O'Connell:

All right, we'll come back to this. I wanted to turn to the second clip, because we can move on to Kim Jong-un specifically. He's still 29, isn't he?

John Sweeney:

No one knows.

Paddy O'Connell:

No one knows. Can I ask for a show of hands, who's 29 in the audience, or below? Right. So I want to hear from you about running a country, in just a moment. But first of all, here's a clip from James Jones' documentary, *Life Inside the Secret State*. It's looking at the new Kim. Let's talk about him and his age, and I'll come back to Jihyun's thoughts, which are being transcribed now.

[film clip]

So we'll talk about this clip, if we can. We're coming to more general regime questions. To you first, John Sweeney, there's this laughter about these ridiculous dictators in the West. We love to laugh at their dreadful fashion, their extraordinary bad taste in taps. We love everything about dictators and how rubbish they are. Do you find anything convincing about the image there?

John Sweeney:

Kim Jong-un, of all the fingers on nuclear triggers around the world – Obama, Putin, Cameron, Hollande and the others – Kim Jong-un's finger is the most podgy, the most immature, and that's frightening. What he's done with his ex-girlfriend and all her friends – imagine executing all of Bananarama. I don't like their music, but that was what happened. It was bad. I don't think the uncle was fed to the dogs but he was shot dead, 9 grams of lead in the back of the head, the old Stalinist way. An incident – nothing as bad as that, but it does feel like we're looking at Macbeth armed with nuclear weapons – was the arrival of the president of Mongolia to North Korea, and Kim Jong-un didn't meet him. If that's true, that's scary because it shows a really foolish mind. It means his regime's days may be numbered, but –

Paddy O'Connell:

We'll come to the regime. John, the points raised in that clip, presenting North Koreans with this man on horseback – we laughed in here. Are you laughing?

John Swenson-Wright:

No, not laughing. I think the transition to power – it's only the second time it's happened, right? – was well-choreographed, was managed very expertly. The removal of Chang Song-thaek demonstrates his ruthlessness. It creates problems for him because it means that in the eyes of ordinary North Koreans – not only age, it's that respect for family. Even though Chang Song-thaek was related by marriage rather than through blood, if you listen to reports of North Korean defectors in the south who have contact with their relatives in the north, they report a growing sense of disquiet, confirmed by this report.

One other thing I think, slightly at odds with John's observation: there's some speculation that Chang was removed precisely because he was trying to feed

some of these rumours that suggested that the leadership was not in charge or was not behaving in a way that had the national interest at stake. So there may have been a subtle kind of political process happening in the north that explains this. But we should take him very seriously, given the resources he has at his fingertips and the fact that *de facto* North Korea is clearly a nuclear state.

Paddy O'Connell:

So this third and final clip, which is more about the president's current tactics. This is from James Jones' documentary, *Life Inside the Secret State*.

[film clip]

Let's move to discuss if the regime is stable or unstable. But firstly to you: any comments arising from those last two clips we saw? If you wanted to share what you thought or ask anyone on the panel.

Question 3:

I have a quick question regarding the last two statements. Considering regime change, how would you say North Korea's agreement to resume six-party talks with South Korea – how does that figure into the regime's stability?

John Swenson-Wright:

I think what we're seeing with the north is a desire to use diplomacy in a very deliberate and concerted way to A) improve their image, and B) create the space in which they can have enhanced discussions with South Korea. Of course, we have seen a response on the part of the Park Geun-hye administration: a willingness to have more of those discussions. Whether they are doing this because they genuinely see these talks as a way of advancing their political interests or whether they are doing it because they do in fact feel vulnerable internally is an almost impossible question to answer at this stage.

Paddy O'Connell:

It is the question we want to answer, unfortunately.

John Swenson-Wright:

It is.

Paddy O'Connell:

Let's stay in this moment of stability or instability. Jihyun, is the North Korean regime stable or is it unstable? Do these actions demonstrate weakness or do they demonstrate strength?

Jihyun Park [via translator]:

From the clips we saw basically what we used to see on TV every day in North Korea. I believe the North Korean regime is unstable and the timing of collapse is important.

Question 4:

I wonder about these foundations for change and how they could have been reinforced. There was an opportunity, I would have thought, half a dozen years or so ago, in the time of Kim Jong-il, when the United Nations were actually providing technical assistance and humanitarian aid to North Korea. Then when the nuclear missiles and underground testing were undertaken, all the aid – other than humanitarian aid – was cut off.

Paddy O'Connell:

And do you think the regime is stable or unstable now? Because I'm coming to change in ten minutes. Is it stable or unstable now?

Question 4:

I personally think it is highly unstable. I would like to think there was a possibility for change in the foreseeable future. But I do wonder whether the international community has, if you like, taken a hands-off approach.

Paddy O'Connell:

Can I ask, is there anyone in the room who thinks the regime is stable? You think the regime is stable?

Question 5:

I think the regime is quite stable in terms of – right now, as we have seen from the clips, it's really hard for the North Korean population to gather together and actually organize a possible reform or revolt. In a sense, this really undermines change in the short term. Since Kim Jong-un also has the atomic bomb, that makes a big difference in terms of what the international community can do.

Paddy O'Connell:

So there's no Twitter, like there was in the Arab Spring.

Question 5:

No, of course not.

Paddy O'Connell:

John, it's a very tightly controlled, brutal administration, which gives it stability in a crazy way.

John Swenson-Wright:

I'm more inclined to agree with our audience member. I think there is a sense, notwithstanding the youth of the leader – the very fact that he has these incredible military assets and his willingness to do something as decisive as remove Chang Song-thaek, who was seen as the elder statesman of North Korea, the man who was the patron of the leader, who was going to provide that adult supervision – I think is an indication that he is in charge. We've seen a great deal of centralization of power in the hands of the party. Very different from the 1990s, when the military was in a much more relatively dominant position. We've also seen in the public statements, the new year's address of the leadership, a commitment to – they don't refer to it as economic reform, but economic change, and a relaxation of control.

Paddy O'Connell:

I'm coming to change. John, you suggested this is a fat finger on the nuclear trigger, from a boy who's unstable and bonkers. Now we're hearing: actually

he's controlling his family by killing them. He's controlling the population with the military, who are being fed. You're wrong.

John Sweeney:

No, this is London, and we're allowed to disagree. So no, I feel that the North Korean regime is fundamentally unstable. My take on this is that the digital revolution which did for the Arab dictators is slowly, slowly corroding the brainwashing wall which keeps out information. By the way, this is why I passionately believe that the BBC should launch a Korea service.

Paddy O'Connell:

All right, we don't want to go into that bit. John, that's it. To you in the back. Is the regime stable or unstable, is the question.

Question 6:

I was actually going to ask, if there was to be a political change, do you believe it would be a –

Paddy O'Connell:

I'm coming to change. Will you tell us about the regime?

Question 6:

No, I don't think so, actually.

John Sweeney:

You can argue with him, it is London.

Paddy O'Connell:

Is the regime stable or unstable?

Question 6:

I believe it is unstable, but I was going to ask if there were to be a change, would it be more of a top-down revolution or a bottom-up?

Paddy O'Connell:

Okay, so in five minutes I'll call you again on change. Who's talking about the regime and this question, if it's stable or unstable?

Question 7:

I will address your exact question. I think the regime is very stable but I think the Kim dynasty is unstable.

John Swenson-Wright:

Well, they're running out of successors – that's the biggest problem. Kim Jong-un in a sense, precisely because he's really the only credible candidate, you could argue is more stable now, because if he were to be removed, who do you put in his place? So his very youth might be an obstacle in terms of his legitimacy in the eyes of his people, but being part of that bloodline – after all, it's that linkage to his father and his grandfather that gives him that legitimacy. Therefore, you could argue it's that absence of any alternatives that makes him the only leader that North Korea can have at this stage.

Paddy O'Connell:

John Sweeney, do you like that distinction? It's allowing you your 'Kim dynasty is mad' but it's allowing some audience members' 'the regime is stable'. Do you like that distinction?

John Sweeney:

No. There's a guy who I met who first went to Romania in 1948. He was Ceausescu's interpreter in Romania. I asked him last summer, for my book *North Korea Undercover*: how long do you think the regime's got? He said: forty years. He may be right, because remember with dictators, they don't crumble, they shear. I went to Zimbabwe in 2002, I thought Mugabe would go – he's still there. However, I do feel it's unstable. If I'm head of the rocket

force and Kim Jong-un says, why has this rocket gone fizz? I'd be inclined to shoot him before he has me shot. I think he's unstable.

Question 8:

Are we overestimating this nuclear capacity? You say he's like a chubby little kid with his finger on the trigger. They've only had one successful detonation. The other detonation was more or less a fizz. They don't have the capacity to launch that nuclear weapon. So are we more looking at a kid with his finger on a conventional threat, rather than a nuclear threat? Is that too much of a factor in this debate?

John Swenson-Wright:

In terms of the threat, of course it's not just a nuclear threat. It's conventional, chemical and biological weapons. Three tests – I think that shows the technical sophistication of the DPRK. It can't deploy it necessarily at the moment, although we think in about a year's time they'll be able to put a crude nuclear device on a short-range ballistic missile and hit Seoul. That's reason enough for me to take it seriously. On top of which, you have the risks of proliferation – not intentionally, but if this regime were to collapse, what will happen to those loose nukes? There are plenty of reasons to take the nuclear threat of North Korea very seriously, notwithstanding the exaggerated boasts of the North Koreans that they can strike at the heart of the United States.

Paddy O'Connell:

Jihyun, will you get ready to answer the question: this control, the threat of killing people – and I'm sorry to ask, maybe it has happened in your family – is it enough to control the population? I'll come to you for an answer. Is that why we could say the regime is stable, not because the Kim dynasty might not fail, but because that's a very good way to control the population, by terror? I'll come back. To you, sir: the regime, is it stable or unstable?

Question 9:

We didn't speak about the foundation of North Korea. It was based on a strong anti-Japanese sentiment. This is one of the reasons I believe the North Korean regime is unstable at the moment. The anti-Japanese sentiment isn't there anymore, or that's how we see it. It's something which happened over

70 years ago. So how do people feel about that, in North Korea, or academics?

Paddy O'Connell:

John Swenson-Wright is a Japanese speaker and was talking to me earlier about how this is a vital question. Thank you for raising it. What's your answer?

John Swenson-Wright:

I'm not sure I entirely agree with your hypothesis, that anti-Japanese opposition was the basis for the North Korean state in its original formation – important as it undoubtedly was. We've just seen the possibility of a resumption of talks between the two Red Cross organizations of North Korea and Japan. There's a greater willingness, I think, for some sort of engagement, out of economic necessity on the part of North Korea. Anti-Japanese sentiment is the one issue that binds together North and South Korea in the current context. I think there are other ways in which the North Koreans now define their national identity.

Paddy O'Connell:

Such as?

John Swenson-Wright:

Blood – ethnicity. That's, in a sense, why there's a disconnect between North and South Korea.

Paddy O'Connell:

But wouldn't that argue in favour of stability? We hate the Japanese and we've got a North Korean identity. Wouldn't that argue in favour of a little bit more stability rather than against?

John Swenson-Wright:

It's very hard to talk for North Koreans. I would defer to my fellow panellist on this issue. But I suspect the real factor that's most important to ordinary North Koreans is economic delivery.

Paddy O'Connell:

Okay but on the gentleman's point – where is it, 1 to 10, anti-Japanese feeling?

John Swenson-Wright:

Oh, 11.

Paddy O'Connell:

So you're wrong, I'm afraid, is the answer. Jihyun, to you. Would you answer this question on control of the people? And did you lose anyone in your family – I'm sorry to ask you this, could you answer that question?

Jihyun Park [via translator]:

Yes, her brother was killed, probably in one of the prison camps. He was a soldier.

Paddy O'Connell:

And when you feed this into the question from the front row about, is this a very effective way to control thought, is it?

Jihyun Park [via translator]:

Although the North Korean regime has been very effective in controlling people's movements and thoughts, some 27,000 North Korean defectors worldwide are a testimony to the instability of the regime. Also, I believe that the extent of brainwashing in education in North Korea is quite different between the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il era, and Kim Jong-un era, because not many children can go to schools anymore as before. They are less exposed to brainwashing.

Paddy O'Connell:

Thank you. Again, we all appreciate you speaking to us and going through this procedure. We wanted to hear firsthand and thank you very much indeed.

Question 10:

Stable or unstable – ask China. Can China afford the collapse of the regime?

John Sweeney:

China's got problems with North Korea. For example, a simple one is: the North Koreans have had three nuclear tests and they managed to get one rocket across Japan, onto the other side. That's scary. At the moment, you're quite right, they haven't got a nuke on top of the rocket, but nevertheless. What the Japanese are saying to the Americans is: listen, the North Koreans are almost ready to be in a position to be able to nuke Tokyo. We're scared about this. Maybe we should get our own nukes. The Chinese don't want that. So there's an argument happening inside China about that. I think if Kim Jong-un is – if somebody shoots him, and I think this is the most likely format of change, some sort of palace coup – then very quickly the Chinese will invade. By the way, that is much better than continued control by the Kim dynasty. But I think the Chinese are seriously looking at that and I think that when Kim Jong-un had his uncle executed – who was, it seems, China's man in Pyongyang – this was a serious mistake.

Paddy O'Connell:

Let's move on to change now. John Swenson-Wright, will you give us your views next. Is there a desire for change among the regime? Is there a desire for change among the people? But you go first in the back. We are now on to change.

Question 11:

Yes, I was going to ask: if there is to be political change, do you reckon it will have to start at the top and be a top-down process, or start at the bottom amongst the people and work its way up?

John Swenson-Wright:

The problem with North Korea is there's no civil society as such, and so the mechanism for change of a type similar to the Arab Spring is hard to see at this stage. I agree with John in the sense that more access, more information – and I support the idea of a BBC Korean-language service to broadcast to North Korea – this would be a good idea and it might facilitate more change. For now, I think the change that the leadership wants is more economic prosperity, because that's the only basis on which the leader is going to sustain that sense of legitimacy.

John Sweeney:

It's most likely to come top-down but that's also why there should be a BBC Korean service, for example. You agree with me, don't you? Should there be a BBC Korean service? Absolutely. I'm fluent enough in Korean to know a yes when I see one.

The great expert on brainwashing is a guy called Professor Lifton, Robert Lifton. I know about him because an ex-Scientologist told me about him. I recommend his book, *Thought Reform*, on brainwashing. He got interested when he had to help American prisoners of war who'd been brainwashed by the Chinese communists after they had been captured in North Korea. Funny old world that an ex-Scientologist told me about him. He says in his book that what's necessary for brainwashing essentially is constriction of information. You cut the information down, and if you're a Scientologist or a North Korean, you don't know what's really happening in the outside world, and they've got you. So this is what's exciting about the demand for short-wave radios that they're listening to. We found North Koreans, regime trustees, who had watched *Homeland* and *Mission Impossible*. Life's too short for me to explain to a North Korean what Tom Cruise really believes in. But nevertheless, that's exciting. The point is that constriction of information is necessary for the regime. They can't open up the economy and keep information down. They're in trouble.

Paddy O'Connell:

John Swenson-Wright, would you say if there's a strong desire for change among the regime? Can we just assume there's a desire for change among the people?

John Swenson-Wright:

I think the key solvent that will, in a sense, dissolve the structure of North Korea is the desire for economic prosperity. Less so the desire for political freedom and liberty. The evidence for this is that if you talk to the children of the elites, kids in their twenties – and we've had some of them studying over here in recent years – what do they want to do? They want to study economic reform. They want to be part of the global economy. What they don't want, unlike the older generation, is a career in politics (albeit North Korean-style politics). They see themselves as having a future as businessmen.

So in that sense, if you want graduated change – and one of the questions we haven't asked ourselves is, what is the consequence of the particular type of change that various people are advocating? A dramatic change – regime collapse, whether it's loose nukes or the geopolitical vacuum (to go back to the question about why China wants stability) – those sorts of changes are going to create potentially huge problems. So if we want change, we ought to be very careful about the type of change we advocate.

Question 12:

The drive for economic prosperity, do you think that in itself will make the regime more stable in the sense that the reason for change, or for the people wanting change, will no longer exist? Because they'll be fed and they won't have to give their food to the military, etc.

John Swenson-Wright:

That's clearly what the regime would like. The regime is interested not in meeting the needs of its own citizenry on its own terms, but rather regime survival. So these exaggerated promises – it's very striking that when Kim Jong-un took over, in a very well reported public address, he said: we will never again call on the North Korean people to tighten their belts. That's an extraordinarily bold promise. What happens if he doesn't deliver? If it were to happen, I don't think it is very likely, because the government's response to the change agenda has been to try and tinker. I don't think they have the expertise and the knowledge. I don't think Kim Jong-un himself has enough information or expertise or maturity to manage that process.

Question 13:

Do we have an idea of how much time does Kim Jong-un have in terms of the current economics of the country? I think some of the things they keep doing is to get South Korea and the US to the negotiating table and get some sort of economic package from them or some sort of economic help, so that they can actually start opening up to the world at some point.

Paddy O'Connell:

That links together with the question from the lady a moment ago, which is if the economic prosperity comes, does it reduce the desire for change which we've been talking about?

John Sweeney:

The Obama administration's philosophy is strategic patience. What was good about last March, when Kim Jong-un was threatening thermonuclear war against the United States – we were there on the day that happened. We went to the DMZ. The colonel in charge of the DMZ was as happy as Larry. If this was right about thermonuclear war, he's toast in five minutes, and he posed for photos, 'Cheese!' Then we went back to Pyongyang and our minder sang 'My Way' – 'regrets, I've had a few, too few to mention'. I won't sing the whole song right now. It was utterly bizarre. What was also good was not a single Western diplomat went home, although they were kind of invited to by Pyongyang. A simple message: we don't believe you, you're bluffing. So this spring, it's interesting that the same American and South Korean military exercises are happening but at the moment the bluster hasn't come. It looks as though Kim Jong-un has realized that crying nuclear wolf last spring didn't work, and he's trying to do a bit of diplomacy with the stuff we were talking about. But it's very hard to read.

My own feeling about this is that essentially they're stuck with a kind of Marxist-Leninist, failed Brezhnev-like economy, in a part of the world where they really need to trade. Therefore the economy is doomed. They don't have enough political will to change it. That tension is irreconcilable. They change the economy, they lose control; they don't want to lose control, so they can't change the economy. Get out of that.

Paddy O'Connell:

Jihyun Park, when and how will change come?

Jihyun Park:

I think rather than the regime, the people of North Korea want change more. But I don't think it will happen in a short period of time. It will take a long time.

John Swenson-Wright:

One of the problems with that question of timing is that on the one hand, it's very hard to engage in the business of prediction and come up with a clear sense of how long the regime has got. The Obama administration, consistent with its policy of strategic patience, thinks it can contain North Korea, thinks it can wait. But that time that the north has as a result of that policy is time in which it can continue to develop its nuclear stockpile, not only its plutonium-based supplies but its highly enriched uranium programme. It's time in which it can refine its ballistic missile capabilities. It's time in which the North Korean people continue to suffer under the authoritarian regime, and those conditions become harsher. But as part of the economic reform process, the state to some extent has lost control of part of this process, and at the same time is flirting with the idea of some kind of contained reform through a series of some 13 or so special economic zones.

There's an argument in the south, on the part of conservatives, that you should shut off those links with the outside world, as a means of putting more pressure on the regime. But that then raises the question again: what sort of collapse, what sort of change, are we going to see?

Paddy O'Connell:

So we're seeing this uncertainty which faced our first question about the regime, about change – the timing of it and how it would look if it came.

Question 14:

I was wondering whether the change could be initiated from outside – let's say, China. Do you think that's possible? Because we understand that Kim Jong-un's uncle was kind of sidelined with China before he was executed. Do you think change could come from that side, if possible?

John Swenson-Wright:

I think it's a mistake to exaggerate the extent to which Chang Song-thaek was China's man. There are others who have links with Beijing. We saw in the aftermath of Chang's execution that, for example, coal exports from North Korea to China increased. China sees North Korea as essentially, increasingly, its own economic sphere of influence, its economic backyard. Therefore they want to maintain control in that area.

Paddy O'Connell:

So they don't want so much change as status quo.

John Swenson-Wright:

Definitely status quo. I think change is the last thing they want.

Question 15:

I wanted to come back to the point the two Johns were making earlier on. John Swenson-Wright was talking about the need for economic reform as a factor for change, and John Sweeney was talking about the need to enhance communications. There is a linkage between the two. When I went to North Korea, I met a series of North Korean companies who were clearly under enormous pressure to do more international business. They were frantic. But none of them had internet access. None of them were able to do even the most basic market research. I went to a media studio that was a favourite of Kim Jong-il and they couldn't even send their cartoons they were producing over the internet to their customers. This is an inherent tension. They cannot achieve economic progress, at least as far as the outside world is concerned, without the communications reforms that John Sweeney was talking about, which endanger the regime.

Paddy O'Connell:

The internet would free up the people to have an Arab-type Spring, would free up business to have economic prosperity. John, we saw you with the phone. What would you comment on that, and perhaps give us some closing thoughts as well.

John Sweeney:

This is the absolute tension. If he opens up the economy, then you've got to have the internet, the modern world, the digital age, information. Information is light. There's a wonderful play by Tom Stoppard, *Night and Day*: information is light. That is the thing. The problem for the regime is, if they switch on the lights, then as well as people becoming more prosperous, people will say, what the hell is this about? This is why I feel the regime is fundamentally unstable. There isn't a solution to this. In the digital age, more and more people in the south – you don't have to go very far. You can just go down the A3 to New Malden. I've done this, I've sat in a room with a woman who regularly talks to her brother in North Korea through a Chinese mobile phone, because he drives up to the border close to China. She sends him 5,000 quid. The broker takes 2,500 quid; the other 2,500 in Chinese notes crosses the border and she gets to the brother. The broker gives it to the brother and the brother says, yes, I've got the money. It's more expensive than Barclay's bank but it's the same principle.

What's happening is that once he's got the money, they have a phone conversation. She keeps on saying: you've got to get out. He says: I don't want to get out, it's risky and frightening. But you've got to get out, because you have no idea what it's like. That message is percolating through the very south of North Korea, as you saw in our film, and also in the north of North Korea. I think change that way comes.

Paddy O'Connell:

John Swenson-Wright, your closing thoughts today?

John Swenson-Wright:

On a more optimistic note, we shouldn't forget that the South Korean government, led by a president whose father in a sense built the miracle on the Han River, firmly believes in the possibility of dialogue with North Korea, albeit under very restricted conditions. She believes that unification is possible. She's just appointed a new ministry that will have that as its agenda. She believes that out of the family reunions we've seen recently and the renewed, more constructive diplomacy that the north is articulating, that there is an opportunity for change. Yes, okay, people are leaving, under the pressure of either economic necessity or political repression – I think the former more than the latter. But we're not seeing a mass exodus and we're even seeing some people returning to North Korea. They're not

representative, but in a sense they represent a significant trend. I would argue that we need to look at these opportunities for diplomatic solutions rather than assuming the worst.

Paddy O'Connell:

To come back to where we started this evening, Jihyun Park, what's a paragraph of your views that you'd like us to all leave knowing about the topics we've raised tonight?

Jihyun Park [via translator]:

I believe China has a lot to do when it comes to changing North Korea. The relationship between China and North Korea has evolved from blood relationship, blood alliance, to symbiotic relationship. Although China has adopted a socialist market economy, in a political sense it is similar to an authoritarian/dictatorial government. We don't know what China has in mind exactly, but China does not want change in the Korean peninsula and I think that's very important when we talk about changing North Korea.

Paddy O'Connell:

Thank you very much indeed. I will ask you to leave it there so we can respect the time. Thank you all very much indeed. We heard that killing is a way to control people and we heard a very personal account on the panel. We heard that there's a 29-year-old in charge who is either, depending on your view, learning the ropes or on his way out. And we heard that China probably wants the status quo. We heard from all of you with great experience and we enjoyed it very much. On behalf of all of us listening, I'd like to thank John Sweeney, John Swenson-Wright, Jihyun Park and Sue Min, the translator tonight. Thank you very much.