

AKS brings together North and South Korean ambassadors for forthright exchange of views

The Anglo-Korean Society made history on March 26 when it brought together the ambassadors to the UK of North and South Korea and the British ambassador to Seoul for an update and discussion on events in the two Koreas and their international repercussions. Unfortunately our ambassador to Pyongyang, Peter Hughes, was unable to attend due to a family bereavement.

Much of the heavily attended meeting, in Committee Room 14 in the House of Commons, focussed not unexpectedly on North Korea's planned rocket launch, which was strongly condemned by our man in Seoul, Martin Uden, the South Korean ambassador Chun Yung-woo and Stephen Lillie, head of the Foreign Office's Far East Group, who stood in at the last minute for Peter Hughes. The three mounted a sustained onslaught on the planned launch which they condemned as dangerous and destabilising and a violation of UN declaration 1718, while the North Korean ambassador, Ja Song-nam, defended it as a justified reaction to the threat that his country sees itself as facing from the United States and other countries. Impoverished North Korea was condemned for spending a vast amount of money on its long-range nuclear missile programme, and Mr Ja made no attempt to deny that it had such a programme or to claim that the rocket launch was simply aimed at putting a communications satellite into space. But he noted that the United States, Britain and many other countries had nuclear weapons and said it was hypocritical of them to condemn his country for taking a similar path. However, he insisted the planned launch did not pose a threat to any foreign country. But despite the firmness of the language used by all sides, and the fact that the North Koreans were greatly outnumbered, the discussion was even tempered throughout and nobody lost their cool.

The evening wasn't devoted entirely to the highly contentious nuclear issue, and there was some positive news too. Rather surprisingly, a group of 10 North Koreans have been studying English in Canterbury and will no doubt have some interesting Canterbury tales to tell when they return to Pyongyang, while four Britons are training North Korean teachers of English in Pyongyang. There are also plans to bring over a North Korean postgraduate scientist to Britain as part of the Foreign Office's Chevening programme www.chevening.com.

Martin Uden reported on how 16 South Korean companies had recently invested in Britain and how his embassy had helped 500 British firms that were inquiring about investing in South Korea. He was also asked about his blog blogs.fco.gov.uk/roller/uden/, which is in English and Korean and noted that blogging is "a rather difficult field" for an ambassador and "not traditional diplomacy." He stressed the importance of South Korea in the current climate change negotiations and noted that the British embassy was the only one in Seoul with a dedicated climate change section. "If we can't persuade Korea [actively to cooperate on climate change], what hope is there that we can hope countries like Brazil will cooperate, still less India and China," he said. North Korea also seems ready to play its part, and Mr Ja said Pyongyang welcomed British investment in green energy in his country and said a North Korean delegation that recently visited Britain had discussed renewable energy projects such as the proposed Severn barrage. Mr Ja also made a tantalising reference to the discovery of the remains of a British airman killed in the Korean war, but gave no details. Encouragingly, he said he was "hoping to see Mr Chun often", so while North-South Korean dialogue remains fraught, it remains alive and perhaps the Anglo-Korean Society will be able to help foster further contacts.

The meeting was chaired by Frank Cook, MP, who hosted surviving members of the legendary North Korean football team when they returned to Britain a few years ago and who reminisced about his two meetings with Kim Il-sung. Mr Cook recalled how President Kim had proposed that after Korea was unified it could have a communist economy in the north and a capitalist economy in the south, which he said showed Kim "needed to learn a bit more about economics and international relations." The society would also like to thank Sylvia Park for organising the meeting so smoothly and making sure it was both instructive and enjoyable. And thanks are also due to Jim Hoare who gave a lively impromptu talk on his experiences as Britain's first envoy to Pyongyang. The discussion was followed by a reception attended by the North and South Korean ambassadors and a couple of hundred other guests who agreed that it had been a highly memorable and worthwhile evening.