

James Trottier – North Korea-related diplomatic experience

I am a former career diplomat, a lawyer and a media commentator and analyst on international relations. I am a Fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute.

From 2013 to 2016, I headed the political/economic (i.e. diplomatic) program at the Canadian Embassy in Seoul, South Korea where I also served as diplomatic liaison to UN/US Forces on the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, I was also accredited to North Korea and led four Canadian diplomatic delegations to North Korea. Since leaving the Foreign Service in 2016, I have continued to be engaged on North Korean issues including participating in expert panels and conferences, writing policy papers, providing media commentary and acting as a consultant to governments.

I also served for four years at Canada's Permanent Mission to the UN in New York where I was the lead for Canada's positions on global human rights and also acted as Acting Legal Adviser during part of the time we were on the Security Council. Given our recent absences from the Security Council, you can imagine how long ago that was – back in the day when Canada was on the Security Council once a decade – a story for another day.

The recent freeing of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor has particular resonance for me, as the focus of my four diplomatic missions to North Korea was negotiation for the release of a Canadian prisoner Pastor Hyeon Soo Lim of Toronto.

I had the unique opportunity of being the first and only Canadian lawyer to ever attend a criminal trial in North Korea.

The Swedish Ambassador and I were also the first diplomats ever to attend such a trial.

Pastor Lim was found guilty of sedition and was sentenced to life at hard labour. Our negotiations laid the foundation for his release to a high-level Canadian Envoy in 2017 after 32 months of detention. This experience has provided me with a certain perspective as I looked at the case of our prisoners in China.

An added element for me is that Michael Spavor was a contact of mine regarding North Korea – not for anything political. His focus was enhancing people to people and cultural links between North Korea and the outside world. So I am delighted at his release.

These Missions to North Korea also provided the opportunity for a wide range of discussions including regarding nuclear weapons, peace and security, human rights and the humanitarian situation.