

Confronting paradoxes – transcending enemy images – searching for peace

Introductory note

At two points during the 20th century Korea was tragically made to suffer tremendous misfortunes. Being subjugated by Japanese militarism, the liberation of the country 70 years ago was short-lived. Again, due to its sensitive geo-strategic location, Korea became a pawn of foreign powers – the USA and the Soviet Union - and was blocked from charting a new era of independence and self-determination.

Worst of all, instead of Japan being partitioned and divided because of its aggressive role during WW II as happened in the case of the other main aggressor, Nazi Germany, this fate befell its former colony Korea. The Korean War (1950-53), the first “hot” military conflict during the Cold War era, still affects the division of the country. Two and a half decades after the end of the West-East bloc confrontation and the fall of the Berlin Wall, a 240 km long “demilitarised zone” still cuts right through the Korean peninsula. This is an unparalleled euphemism and anachronism: the terrain along both sides of the 38th parallel is the most heavily guarded, most highly militarised and most conflict-prone region worldwide.

Since March 1st, 2001 diplomatic relations at ambassadorial level have existed between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the FRG. Almost a year later, on January 29th, 2002, US-President George W. Bush explicitly referred to North Korea in his State of the Union Address – in addition to Iraq and Iran – as part of the “axis of evil”, which should be cracked by a US dominated “coalition of the willing” or “alliance against terror”. Thus reviving the bitter enmity that had characterized the relationship between Washington and Pyongyang since the Korean War.

Manifold paradoxes

For an outsider many things on the Korean Peninsula appear to be highly paradoxical, which seems to be intricately linked to its delicate geo-strategic location. To mention but a few of these paradoxes:

- 1) To outsiders, the DPRK is in some ways reminiscent of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in the People's Republic of China at the end of the sixties, whereas ROK has become one of the powerhouses of the global economy and the second Asian country – after Japan – to be admitted to the exclusive club of the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD).
- 2) Long before ROK morphed into a “miracle economy”, it was the DPRK that for many countries in the so-called Third World (especially after 1960 with many African states gaining independence) served as “model of autocratic development”.
- 3) Whereas the DPRK is often depicted as a bizarre and/or unpredictable “rogue state” allowing a large number of its citizens to starve, ROK is still clinging to a highly anachronistic National Security Law (NSL), which not only survived a decade of “Sunshine Policy”, but still suggests a “deep state” Seoul style!

- 4) The whole year 1994, for example, was full of highly paradoxical occurrences. In the summer it seemed as if the Korean peninsula was on the verge of another military conflict. In Seoul and other cities sirens kept ringing, air defence trainings increased and people started to hoard food. Western media conjured up the threat of the “nuclear gangster” Pyongyang. Yet, at the height of this precarious situation a détente became apparent. Presidents Kim Young Sam and Kim Il Sung signalled their willingness for a summit meeting. But in midst of the preparations Kim Il Sung died.
- 5) Again Washington reactivated its reproach of the DPRK being a “rogue state”, while analysts of various think tanks branded North Korea as a country torn apart by bitter political rivalries and also doomed to implode like the Soviet Union and states in Eastern Europe. Instead, on June 13th, 2000, the DPRK’s political leadership played host to the first inner-Korean summit – a truly historical breakthrough!
- 6) Whereas bilateral relations between North and South often soured and at times turned into open confrontations, the main product of the June 15, 2000 North-South-Declaration, the Gaesong Industrial Complex, is still there and has weathered all political ups and downs.
- 7) When Kim Dae Jung, by means of his “Sunshine Policy” reached out to the North, it was ROK’s self-avowed “overall-protector”, the US under the administration of Bush Jr., who pre-empted this move. When, instead, President Lee Myung Bak favored a harshly confrontational policy vis-à-vis Pyongyang, it was Washington that pursued a course of engagement.

Beyond paradoxes

In line with the Agreed Framework signed on 21st October 1994 dealing with North Korea’s nuclear program at Yongbyon and arranging to defuse the so-called 1st atomic crisis, Pyongyang was to be supplied with two light-water reactors by the year 2003, 500,000 tons of crude oil and coal amounting to a total of 4,6 billion US dollars annually. Furthermore, a security guarantee was granted to Pyongyang and both sides agreed to establish Liaison Offices in the respective capitals. The *Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation (KEDO)*, a nuclear consortium founded only for this purpose, was entrusted with the realisation of the technical and financial assistance one year later.

William J. Perry, one of the architects of the Agreed Framework, was commissioned by the Clinton administration to articulate the guidelines of a new coherent US policy vis-à-vis North Korea. After an intensive Shuttle-Diplomacy Perry produced a report which was published on October 12th, 1999. In it he argued strongly in favor of the Agreed Framework and saw to it that all protagonists involved could save their face. Furthermore, the report revised the earlier premise that North Korea’s regime would implode soon and it vigorously advocated Kim Dae Jung’s “Sunshine Policy”, thus sending to Pyongyang the most important US-signal of détente ever!

Bruce Cumings then noted in his essay entitled *U-turn in the US: Washington’s tension policy in East Asia*: “The sixth month-work (of Perry and his colleagues – R.W.) concluded with the recommendation to intensify the negotiations with Pyongyang. The new approach resulted in a preliminary agreement on the North Korean missiles, which meant a great advantage for the United States as well as for the whole Asia-Pacific region. At that time, North Korea seemed willing to stop any production, deployment or export of missiles with a striking range of more than 500 km. In both strategic questions – nuclear policy and ballistic missiles – an agreement was at hand

and seemed to be close" [quoted in: *Le Monde diplomatique* (German edition), Berlin/Zürich: Mai 2001, p. 11].

Pyongyang thus enjoyed a considerable backing of its own policy and embarked on a diplomatic offensive urging the governments of several Western European states to establish full diplomatic relations. Already in early 2000, Italy and Canada had reacted positively, while Berlin, London, Madrid and Brussels signalled their intention to establish such ties soon as a supportive measure of the ongoing inner-Korean détente process. At the third *Asia-Europe-Summit-Meeting* (ASEM) in Seoul in Summer 2000 attended by the then 15 EU-member states and 10 countries in East and Southeast Asia they strongly reaffirmed this commitment.

The visit of U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright on October 23rd and 24th, 2000 to Pyongyang was certainly the peak of North Korea's foreign policy acumen and diplomacy. For the very first time, a high-ranking representative of the US government paid a state visit to the People's Republic. If President Bill Clinton had not been constrained by efforts trying to deescalate the then mounting Palestinian-Israeli conflict and were he not caught in a grotesquely protracted ballot count after the election, his last state visit would have taken him to Pyongyang where respective preparations were already underway following Mrs. Albright's visit.

Bush Junior and the never ending "war on terror"

What at the beginning of 2001 had looked quite promising and seemed to have laid the groundwork for a carefully orchestrated and continuous détente on the Korean peninsula was swept aside once George W. Bush was inaugurated as America's 43rd president. Hardly ever has a visiting Head of State, and one who had only recently been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, been snubbed so badly and been so disgracefully treated as Kim Dae Jung was in March 2001.

On the occasion of the first state visit of an Asian Head of State at the White House in March 2001, the US-President called North Korea in no uncertain terms a menace to East Asia, with whom negotiations were to be halted unceremoniously and eventually resumed only after a policy review. . When, furthermore, Bush cast doubt on the effectiveness of the inner-Korean dialogue and announced his intention to suspend any support for it, President Kim was depicted as a naïve zealot and his entire entourage looked like wet poodles. Only a day before (March 6th), the new Secretary of State, Colin Powell, had assured the guests, that "we're going to take up where the Clinton administration left off."

As Donald P. Gregg, former U.S. ambassador to South Korea (1989-1993) and national security adviser to Vice President George H. W. Bush, has succinctly put it in an interview with *FRONTLINE* (see: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kim/>): "The Bush administration never had a policy. It had an attitude - hostility. (...) I refer to North Korea as the longest-running intelligence failure in the history of U.S. espionage. (...) We threatened them with nuclear weapons during the Korean War, and they haven't forgotten that. And Washington cut the Agreed Framework, not the North Koreans. (...) After Bill Perry's excellent work in defusing the missile crisis of 1998, the North Koreans even sent Jo Myong Rok, their second-ranking man, to the United States. He stopped in San Francisco, and asked to be taken to Silicon Valley, because he said, 'We

need to move to a wireless economy.’ He visited the White House in uniform, invited Bill Clinton to visit North Korea. A very important statement was issued at that time, saying, ‘We two countries do not harbor hostile relations toward each other. We will work toward the improvement of relations.’”

No such statement was ever to be heard during the terms of Mr. Bush, Jr. Or as Justin Raimondo pointed out in his article *Explaining North Korea* on Antiwar.com (see: <http://original.antiwar.com/justin/2013/04/02/explaining-north-korea/>): “With all the military moves and sophisticated armaments focused on the Korean peninsula lately, the irony is that the US and South Korea refuse to wield the one weapon that could bring down the North Korean regime: the prospect of peaceful reunification. Back in the good old days of the ‘Sunshine Policy’, when the South Koreans seemed about to make a breakthrough and actually bring about the non-violent reunion of the country, Washington nixed the proposal – and it’s been downhill ever since. And the one big sticking point is the continued presence of some 30,000 US troops in South Korea. As long as the US maintains a military presence there, the long-delayed end of the Korean war will have to be indefinitely postponed.”

Concluding remarks

I fully agree with the authors of the *Pyongyang Appeal* and Peter Prove, director of WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, who after a recently concluded visit to the DPRK observed: “From the North Korean perspective, the biggest obstacles to peace are the tensions generated by the repeated joint military exercises in the vicinity of the Korean peninsula, the economic sanctions, and other ‘provocative’ measures – including the repeated scattering of propaganda leaflets by helium balloons from the South, and the international denunciation of the human rights situation in the DPRK. (...) human rights of people in the region could be better secured by urgent measures to reduce tensions and to promote peace and reconciliation, than through measures that risk provoking conflict, which could be catastrophic for the people of the region as a whole.”

As has been proven in the past, negotiations and talks based on mutual trust and reciprocity are the most important mechanisms to help de-escalate conflicts and reduce enemy images. Historically, there were at least four such major endeavours jointly undertaken by ROK and DPRK: First: The July 4, 1972 Declaration by the Red Cross teams of both sides. Second: The Treaty on Reconciliation and Cooperation and Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula reached at the end of 1991. And finally the North-South Declarations of June 15, 2000 and October 4, 2007, respectively. But basically due to external factors these important steps failed: Washington unexpectedly opened relationships with Beijing and ROK declared martial law, whereas DPRK was overtaken by equally unexpected developments in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe getting weary of “glasnost” and “perestroika”. The rapprochements in 2000 and 2007 were pre-empted in the course of “the war on terror”, while whipping up again enemy images towards DPRK.

No wonder that the political leadership in Pyongyang, considering the disastrous legacy in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and lately Yemen in the aftermath of 9/11 and for reasons rooted in a logic of survival and intrinsically linked to its own experiences from 1945 till 1953, was and continues to be guided by the basic principle: if we are not respected as being on a par with other members of the international community, we would then at least want to be internationally ostracized as equals.

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