

# NORTH KOREA AS HISTORY AND DIPLOMACY

Carter Eckert\*

## 1. Introducción

Whether characterized as a “rogue state” or part of an “axis of evil”, North Korea has come to represent a dangerous and incomprehensible threat in American foreign policy. Such demonization has spread more broadly into American popular culture and has even crossed political boundaries, as evidenced by the recent hilarious hit puppet film *Team Spirit: World Peace*, which satirizes U.S. President George W. Bush’s zealous hunt for international terrorists but also depicts North Korea’s leader Kim Jong Il as the ultimate embodiment of international malevolence. Given its totalitarianism and strident state rhetoric, as well as its mixed, often puzzling, record of international behavior, most recently with respect to the issue of nuclear weapons, it is easy to condemn and dismiss North Korea. Trying to understand the country, on the other hand, is decidedly more difficult, but it is also more likely in the end to provide the basis for a realistic policy that will help bring the North out of its isolation and promote peace on the Korean peninsula and in the world. Here, a knowledge of Korean history, even if it cannot peel off all the layers of mystery and confusion surrounding North Korea, can be a useful guide.

## 2. The Importance of Foreign Relations in Korean History

We might begin simply by noting the crucial importance of foreign relations in Korea’s long pre-modern history. Korea is a small country compared to the countries that surround it. Geographically it is also

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\* Carter J. Eckert, Professor of International Studies at Harvard University, is the author of a number of books and articles on Korea, including “Offspring of Empire: The Colonial Origins of Korean Capitalism”. He is also co-author of “Korea Old and New: A History”, a widely-used university textbook on Korean history, and nowadays is working on a new textbook of modern Korean history for Oxford University Press. Professor Eckert is presently a member of the Advisory Committee of the Korea Foundation, the Editorial Board of the Journal of Korean Studies, and the Northeast Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies (NEAC).

situated at the crossroads of East Asian political, cultural and military-strategic interactions. Physically connected to the Asian mainland, it has been subject on the one hand to the historically hegemonic power of China or whatever ethnic group was in control of China. But it is also flanked on east by Japan, which curls around the peninsula like a long samurai sword and is separated at its closest point by only about 120 miles of sea. Neither of these great powers, nor, indeed, any other power with an interest in Northeast Asia, has felt comfortable simply ignoring Korea. Instead Korea has tended to be regarded by its neighbors either as a buffer from foreign invasion or as a gateway and path for territorial expansion.

Given these challenging geographical circumstances, it is remarkable that Korea, which became a unified state in the 7th century, was for the most part able to maintain its territorial and political integrity until the end of the Chosôn dynasty, in 1910. Although military deterrence played a certain role at various times in helping to accomplish this feat, diplomacy was probably even more crucial in Korea's survival and prosperity as an independent kingdom. Especially important was Korea's handling of its relationship with various Chinese dynasties, through the tributary system, which gave the country *de facto* autonomy in its domestic affairs, access to the benefits of Chinese civilization, and military assistance in exchange for formal political obeisance to the Chinese emperor. When the armies of the Japanese warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi invaded Chosôn Korea in the late 16th century, the Ming dynasty, with which the Korean court maintained a regular and harmonious tributary relationship, promptly came to Korea's assistance. To be sure, the Ming decision to intervene on Korea's behalf also signified the importance China attached to Korea as a buffer against a Japanese invasion of China.

### 3. The Crisis of the Late 19th Century

In the late 19th century, however, the Chosôn dynasty faced a major crisis in international relations with the spread of Western imperialism in East Asia. Quite simply the old international order, based on the tributary system, was suddenly supplanted by a new order, based on capitalist industrial and military power and rationalized and justified by Western international law. Just as some elements remain stable in certain chemical solutions but begin to break down in others, the Chosôn

dynasty began to feel the strains and pressures of its new environment. As many Koreans realized at the time, this was a moment of truth: if Korea did not handle the crisis well, it could become, as a well-known reformist, Yu Kilchun, wrote in the 1880s, the “slave” of a more powerful nation which had “mastered” the international system.

Basically one might say that the Chosŏn government had three choices at the time. Like the proverbial ostrich, it could simply ignore the new international system and hope it would in effect go away or at least not impinge on Korean autonomy. This was, in fact, the first course adopted by the Korean court, which initially refused even to recognize the new Meiji government in Japan, let alone establish any kind of commercial relationship with it beyond the circumscribed intercourse that had been carried on with Japan through the daimyo of Tsushima. But such insouciance, especially in the face of vastly superior military force, could hardly be maintained for long.

Another option was for Korea to emulate the Japanese by establishing a wealthy and strong modern nation-state and work with the new international system from a position of strength. Here, too, however, there were serious obstacles: the inherent conservatism of the dominant aristocratic bureaucracy, which tended to regard reform not only as a threat to their material interests but as ideologically repugnant; a timid and often feckless monarch, who too often looked upon reform simply as a challenge to his royal authority; and severe financial constraints that were not easily overcome without a fundamental change in the structure of the polity. Such problems were epitomized by the failure of the dynasty to establish a modern conscript army that could provide an adequate defense or deterrent to foreign aggression, not incidentally one of the earliest major reforms undertaken by the new Japanese government after the Meiji Restoration.

Under such conditions, the only remaining option left to Korea was to rely on the good offices and protection of a more powerful country or countries. Thus, between 1876 and 1905, the Chosŏn government continually shifted its policies in search of a reliable ally who would help the country preserve and protect its independence, turning first to Qing China, then to Russia, then to the United States and other Western powers, and even at times looking to Japan for support. In the end, of course, the result of this elusive pursuit of outside protection was disastrous. China and Russia were removed from contention in humiliating wars with Japan in 1894-5 and 1904-5, and following the Russo-Japanese War, the international community effectively ceded

control of Korea to Japan. The United States, which had been the first Western power to establish diplomatic relations with Korea in 1882, was also the first Western nation to close down its embassy there following Japan's war with Russia. In fact, the United States had shortly before signed a secret protocol with Japan, the Taft-Katsura Memorandum, that recognized Japan's paramount position in Korea in exchange for a similar recognition of America's interest in the Philippines. In 1905, Korea, now bereft of any additional allies to whom it might turn to defend its interests, was forced to become a protectorate of Japan, the beginning of 40 years of brutal Japanese occupation and colonization.

#### **4. The Lessons of History**

George Santayana once famously wrote that "those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." One might say in the case of Korea that "those who remember the past too well are condemned to do everything in their power to avoid repeating it". The loss of country in 1905 and the consequent years of Japanese colonialism left a traumatic national memory that was subsequently incorporated into the educational systems and textbooks of North and South Korea and is still very much alive in the consciousness of Koreans today.

Koreans tended to draw two important and related lessons from the late Chosôn experience with respect to foreign relations and the international order:

1. The danger of internal weakness and dependence on outside aid; or, conversely, the importance of internal strength and independence in all matters, not least of national solidarity and military defense.
2. The danger of relying entirely on outside powers or the international system to protect Korean interests in a world where great-power chauvinism can often rule the day; or, conversely, the importance of maintaining a firm, defensive nationalist perspective and position in all international relations.

These two lessons have been at the core of the two great nation-building efforts in North and South Korea after 1945, especially under Kim Il Sung and Park Chung Hee. And of course they were reinforced

and intensified by the division of the country and devastating civil war between North and South between 1950 and 1953. In NK these ideas formed the basis of what became the official ideology of *chuch'e*, usually translated into English as “self-reliance”. In South Korea they were promoted under Park’s slogan of *kūndaehwa*, or “modernization”, that also emphasized the importance of a self-reliant economy and self-reliant defense (*chaju kyōngje*, *chaju kukbang*).

Although significantly different in a number of respects, both nation-building efforts were in fact remarkably similar in their attempts to construct very tightly controlled, cohesive, disciplined, and nationalistic societies that were as independent as possible, especially with respect to economy and defense. Park Chung Hee saw his Yusin reforms after 1972 as a way to “defend the fatherland by fashioning a total security posture as impregnable as a steel drum”. Kim, who had fewer restraints than Park in attaining this common goal, both domestically and internationally, was in the end able to create a state that was in fact closer to Park’s “steel drum” than the Yusin state even at its height in the late 1970s. As a number of scholars have pointed out, Kim fashioned a state that was, in effect, based on his anti-Japanese guerrilla experience writ large, a state that viewed itself under constant siege from the outside, arguably the most totalitarian state in modern or perhaps even recorded history.

To be sure, both North and South Korea had to depend to a considerable extent on support and assistance from their respective Cold War allies, the Soviet Union and the United States, especially in their first 10-15 years of existence. What is noteworthy, however, is that despite these important alliances, recognized as vital by both Koreas, both Koreas sought as much as possible to carve out their own autonomy, and often disagreed, sometimes quite angrily, on fundamental issues with their allies, especially in the areas of economy and defense. Although each accused the other of being the “puppet” of its foreign ally, neither was in fact even remotely so. Records, for example, of contentious interactions between South Korean presidents and officials and their American counterparts are numerous, not least of all during the Park era, when the US-ROK Cold War alliance was perhaps at its peak. On many occasions, especially following a North Korean commando raid on the presidential mansion in Seoul in 1968, after which the US refused to take any action against North Korea, and, again, following the US retreat from Vietnam in 1975, Park bitterly voiced his distrust in US promises to defend Korea and other allies and linked what he perceived as America’s failure to keep its word with a whole series of such failures of the international system

going back to the Chosôn dynasty. And he asserted again and again the crucial importance of national self-reliance. Precisely because of that lack of trust in international promises, and in the promises of the US specifically, Park embarked on a secret nuclear weapons program in the late 1970s until he was forced to suspend it by direct and indirect pressure from the United States.

Recent scholarship on North Korea using a variety of newly available sources from China, Russia, and former communist regimes in eastern Europe also shows quite clearly an often suspicious and strained relationship between North Korea and its communist allies. Even at what was the nadir of the Korean War for the North, after the Inchon landing, when UN forces had recaptured Seoul and were set to sweep north across the 38th parallel, the North Koreans were reluctant to invite the Chinese forces into their country for fear of Chinese encroachment on Korean sovereignty, and they continued to resist any perceived infringement on their independence, as in the case of establishing a unified military command under Chinese leadership. These new sources also reveal a deep-seated wariness about the Soviet Union and eastern European allies, especially following Stalin's death, when North Korea publicly asserted a much more independent stance and the Soviet Union tried to push North Korea toward a more liberal polity and less autarchic economy. One of the reasons that North Korea has managed to survive the collapse of the Soviet Union is no doubt that its system was far less integrated with the Soviet Union than its counterparts in eastern Europe.

## **5. The Post-Cold War World**

Today the international situation is of course very different from what it was at the height of the Cold War during the Park Chung Hee and Kim Il Sung administrations. But ideas of self-reliance and defensive nationalism continue to resonate in both Koreas and affect their attitudes toward the outside world and their foreign policies.

In South Korea the situation is very complex, owing to the country's wealth and burgeoning democracy. The South is also deeply and widely enmeshed in the international system through active participation in numerous international organizations and as a signatory to numerous international protocols. But even in South Korea one can still find traces of the insecurities and lessons of the past that this presentation has tried to highlight. Precisely because South Korea has undergone such

rapid and dramatic change and is now a very different society from what it was 25 years ago at the end of the Park period, the ways in which these concerns are expressed are somewhat different among different generations of people. Anecdotal evidence suggests three somewhat different generational perspectives, which are sketched below in ideal-typical form.

First, there is a perspective that is generally associated with the older generation, roughly people 60 years of age and older. The defining life experiences of this group were poverty and civil war. For them, North Korea is still very much a national enemy, and they still largely adhere to the Park Chung Hee formula maintaining a tightly disciplined, cohesive society and Korean national autonomy within the context of a strong bi-lateral alliance with the US. Although currently out of power, they are still able to exert substantial influence through the main opposition party and well-established conservative institutions, including one of Korea's most widely-read newspapers, the *Chosŏn ilbo*.

Second, there is the perspective of the so-called 3.8.6 generation: people in their 30s (or now in their 40s), who were in college in the 1980s, having been born in the 1960s. Their defining generational life experience was the revolutionary student politics of the 1980s that sought to bring down the military-led government established by Park and resurrected by his successors Chun Doo Hwan and Roe Tae Woo after Park's assassination in 1979. For them, North Korea is no longer a national enemy, and they favor moderate to radical social and economic reform that would largely dismantle the "steel drum" erected by Park Chung Hee. As students who denounced the United States for its "imperialism" and support for military-led governments, they remain very suspicious of the United States and its policies with respect to Korea.

Finally, there is a third perspective, that of the younger generation of South Koreans still in their 20s. Here there is no direct experience of poverty, war, or even the political struggles of the 1980s. Unlike the older generation, they are not concerned about weakening social cohesion or the North Korean threat. Their nationalism is tempered by a growing global consciousness, the result of increased travel and use of the internet, among other things. They are the least political and most cosmopolitan of the three generations, although politically they are probably more supportive of the current 3.8.6 generation's views than of the older generation's, which they tend to regard as *passé*. Despite their cosmopolitanism, or perhaps because of it, they share with the 3.8.6 generation a certain concern about America's involvement in Korean

affairs. In particular, they tend to see South Korea as an advanced and independent country, prosperous, democratic, and equal to other similarly advanced countries, and they are especially critical of idea of maintaining a special security relationship with the US, which they see as an artifact of the Cold War and a possible impediment to reconciliation with the North.

Generational differences notwithstanding, it is significant that one can still find currents of concern about internal weakness and great-power chauvinism in South Korea, despite that country's wealth, military strength, and international standing in the world. Indeed, the recent and ongoing public furor in South Korea over what is perceived as China's attempts to "steal" Korea's historical heritage by claiming the ancient state of Koguryô as part of "Chinese" history is a fascinating testimony to the degree to which these concerns lie just below the psychic surface in South Korea. And if one finds such concerns in South Korea, one should not be surprised that they exist in North Korea to a vastly greater degree, given that country's poverty, weakness, and international isolation. One suspects that it is precisely this profound insecurity and suspicion that lie at the heart of North Korea's foreign relations, particularly its relationship with the United States, and that these anxieties are in fact fueling North Korea's apparent effort to develop a nuclear weapons program, just as Park Chung Hee's own anxieties about national defense drove him to a similar effort in South Korea in the 1970s.

The historical memories are long in both Koreas, and from the North Korean perspective, the United States represents only the latest and most dangerous historical threat to Korean sovereignty. Indeed, from the North Korean perspective, still deeply informed by the experience and memory of the Korean War, the United States has time and again since the 1950s demonstrated its aggressive intent toward the North. It was the United States that rained bombs down upon North Korea during the Korean War, more bombs in fact than all of the bombs dropped during World War II. It is the United States that has continuously menaced the North with its nuclear weapons. From the North Korean perspective, the nuclear threat is an American threat.

## **6. North Korea as Diplomacy**

Such national anxieties do not of course excuse or justify North Korea's repressive politics or suspicious, even deceitful, foreign policy.

Nevertheless, if we wish to resolve the North Korean problem diplomatically, it behooves us to understand the problem not only from our own perspective but also from a North Korean perspective. There are many reasons why the current US administration has failed to resolve the Korean crisis, including, not least of all, its fixation on Iraq. But among the most important reasons for failure has been the inability or unwillingness of the Bush government to understand the historical depth of North Korea's insecurity and its suspicion of great-power chauvinism. From that perspective, the Bush administration has done everything almost perfectly wrong.

Initially it refused to engage in any kind of dialogue with North Korea at all –perhaps reflecting a wishful thinking that the regime would simply collapse and the problem would disappear. Such a refusal even to engage in any kind of dialogue of course signaled to the North Koreans a lack of respect for North Korean sovereignty and heightened fears that Bush was indeed only interested only in the regime's demise, either through internal subversion or through some kind of outside military action.

The repudiation of dialogue was followed by Bush's designation of North Korea as part of the famous "axis of evil," and by his personal comments, reported in the press that he personally "loathed" the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Il.

Then, of course, there was Iraq. From the North Korean perspective, if ever there was a good reason to begin or to accelerate a nuclear weapons program, America's invasion of Iraq was it. Especially at the time it seemed possible even to many Americans –and, one must assume, most certainly to the North Koreans- that the Bush administration regarded Iraq as the first step in an continuing offensive against the three countries named in the "axis of evil".

Finally, at the end of his first term, Bush decided that he would after all talk to the North Korea, but only indirectly in the context of a multilateral forum convened by China. While there is nothing wrong in principle with a multilateral forum, the Bush administration's decision to rely on China to solve the problem, as it were, reflected once again its lack of understanding of Korean history. As noted above, Koreans are acutely sensitive to any signs of an incipient Chinese hegemony in the region, and the rejection by the US of direct bilateral negotiations with North Korea has succeeded only in insulting North Korean pride, which insists on diplomatic equality, while needlessly fostering acrimony. In the meantime, because of the Bush administration's foundering and

ineptitude, North Korea was given 4 years in which to develop a nuclear weapons program.

## **7. Looking Ahead by Looking Back**

As a second Bush presidency commences, keeping the Korean peninsula nuclear-free may already be a lost opportunity. It is not inconceivable that the North Koreans have already decided that the only effective antidote their national anxiety in the current atmosphere is in fact the possession of nuclear weapons. Certainly the logic of the historical argument being made here tends to support that conclusion.

But history is by no means predetermined or teleological. Ultimately what happens is contingent on a variety of factors, some of which may be unknown at the moment. There is still room for chance, choice, leadership, and, one hopes, diplomacy. It is worth noting, for example, that North Korea publicly stated after the 2004 presidential election that it was still ready to talk and negotiate. If indeed it is not too late and there is a possibility that North Korea can be persuaded to give up whatever nuclear ambitions it may have, it will only be persuaded when the US takes into account the country's deeply-rooted, historical sense of insecurity and nationalism and finds a framework for an agreement that genuinely assuages those concerns and encourages North Korea over time to become, like South Korea, an active participant in building a peaceful and prosperous world community.

Here, too, we may look to Korean history for some hope. A long historical view of Korean politics, both modern and pre-modern, suggests that North Korea is not a monolithic state with a single point of view, despite its totalitarian exterior. Within the North Korean polity, as within the late Chosôn dynasty, there are surely groups of reformists, or if not groups, individuals, who see North Korea's best hopes for security not in the possession of nuclear weapons but in a wide-ranging diplomatic settlement that gives the country a stake in the world and the world a stake in North Korea. Such reformers will be encouraged and strengthened by a creative policy on the part of the United States.

So while history weighs heavily in the consciousness of North Korea, the past is not insurmountable. At the same time those who fail to appreciate the weight of history in North Korea run the risk of failing to grasp both the challenges and the possibilities of a peaceful, diplomatic solution to the North Korean crisis.

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