

The United States and North Korea — Future Prospects

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It is now nearly fifty years since the end of World War II, but the legacy of that war continues to project itself onto the international stage. Divided Korea is a foremost example. The issue of Korea, moreover, is at once domestic, regional and global. It centrally involves the Korean people—the recurrent threat of renewed conflict and the hope of ultimate reunification. But, it also represents a problem to Korea's neighbors since tensions affect their relations with each other as well as the security of Northeast Asia. And, because all of the major powers are involved in varying degrees, it has global implications.

The United States, in particular, has been intimately involved in Korea since 1945. Following the Korean War, moreover, Washington's alliances with the Republic of Korea has never been in doubt. One lesson of that war was that a nation should never mislead a potential opponent. The uncertainty regarding America's intentions towards the defense of the South misled the communists and exacted a heavy price from all concerned. This particular lesson has been learned. Today, the U.S. is determined to make its commitments to the ROK unmistakably clear. At the same time, in the post-Cold War era, the nature of alliances has changed. The movement is away from patron-client relations and toward greater partnership. In early times, alliances were relatively exclusive and all-encompassing. The

major partner promised security and, in many cases, economic assistance; the minor partner promised political allegiance. Today, those alliances that still exist are less exclusive, permitting important contacts external to the relationship and demanding continuing negotiations over the respective interests of the allies.

In the case of the U.S. - ROK alliance, for example, the ROK under President Roh Tae Woo launched a successful Nordpolitik policy without American objection, and that policy was a resounding success. In addition, as a result of continuous economic growth, Republic of Korea was able to extend its reach throughout East Asia as well as into the rest of the world. It acquired the attributes of an important medium-sized power, and with this development, a renewed nationalism gained strength in company with other Asian nations. At the same time, however, the importance of retaining basic ties with the United States has been recognized by successive governments and a large majority of the citizenry.

On the part of the United States, foreign policy changes have also been underway as a natural reaction to a different world and the domestic challenges facing a post-modern society. In my opinion, three trends stand out. First, to be accepted by the American people, U.S. foreign policy must be defended in terms of U.S. national interests; altruism is not dead, but it is more subordinate than during the early post-1945 era. In terms of those interests, moreover, economic factors while not exclusive, are generally dominant.

Second, in each specific instance where American involvement is requested or contemplated, judgments about whether

such involvement is warranted and what degree and type of involvement is rational, must hinge upon an assessment of the U.S. national interests in the particular situation, the potential costs and risks to attain the desired outcome, if indeed, such an outcome is possible, and the willingness of others to share the responsibilities in pursuing an activist course. The movement of the United States from unilateralism to multilateralism in foreign policy, while not uniform, is implicit in the nature of our times. The intimate interrelation between domestic and international conditions makes isolation impossible for a global power like the United States. But, the U.S. will increasingly aspire to be a leader, not the leader—with coalition-building, *ad hoc* and designed for each specific situation, the supreme challenge.

Finally, given the complexities of the contemporary world, the U.S. has to be prepared to operate internationally at many levels—bilateral, regional and global—simultaneously, while engaging in experimentation with respect to institutions and negotiating mechanisms. There are no final answers or fixed institutions in this age of global revolution.

It is in this context that one should view the complex nature of the U.S. relations with the DPRK in recent past. First, as is well known, these relations were minimal until the early 1990s, being restricted primarily to the formal sessions at Panmunjom and the occasional visits of private individuals. The level of hostility was high, and periodic incidents disturbed the calm, threatening large-scale violence.

Certain events occurred at the end of the 1980s, however, that presaged changes. The collapse of the Soviet Union,

accompanied by the upheavals throughout East Europe shook the foundations of the North Korean economy, an economy already in increasing difficulty. In addition, neither isolation nor the balance of power politics periodically practiced by the DPRK with respect to China and the USSR were viable strategies. In the period that followed, both these major powers pursued policies extremely painful to Pyongyang. Against its will, the DPRK was forced to accept dual membership in the United Nations with the South. Recognition of the ROK followed, brusksly executed by Moscow, achieved more suavely by Beijing, but nonetheless creating an entirely new atmosphere within the old Leninist world. On the economic front, equally major developments took place, with friendship prices gone, and credits restricted from the North's old principal trading partners.

Given such conditions, it is not surprising that DPRK leaders saw in the Nordpolitik policies of the ROK an example of adjustment worthy of emulation. Ideology was no longer an inhibiting factor in the forging of new relations. And in this case, with allies undependable or casting glances at others, why not seek other possibilities?

North Korea's new strategy was born out of these factors. That strategy in its simplest dimensions was to aim, first, at an improvement in relations with the United States, looking toward the replacement of the armistice with a peace treaty, and diplomatic recognition from Washington. Secondly, normalization of relations with Japan, accompanied by economic benefits, was on the new agenda, with the assumption, at least initially, that such actions would flow more or less naturally from success with the United States. In this process, the cultivation of China

as a “lips and teeth” ally was to continue, but without any illusions as to China’s primary interests, or its private attitudes about the DPRK system. It was assumed that Russia, seeing the unfolding of events, would seek improvements in relations, desiring to regain its role as a major actor in Northeast Asia, and this could be encouraged at the appropriate time. Finally, while these events were unfolding, the ROK government should be kept at arm’s length while united front policies were vigorously pursued, taking advantage of the South’s increasing political pluralism.

From the standpoint of the DPRK, this was an eminently logical policy, given the circumstances in which it found itself. However, would it fit the interests of the other parties involved, especially the United States? First, one must note a debate in the U.S. that had earlier centered upon China policy continued. What was the best method of dealing with an authoritarian society in the event of contention, political and economic? What broad principle should be applied in an effort to produce desirable changes—containment or involvement? When such a society transgressed in its relations with its neighbors, pursued economic policies detrimental to others, or violated elemental human rights, was the appropriate route that of sanctions and a strengthening of political and military pressures? Or, was a more promising route that of engagement, including intensive negotiations, with others whose national interests were involved, served as participants and partners?

Obviously, the approach could be nuanced, avoiding an “either-or” decision. Certain pressures or sanctions could be applied or be kept in the offing even as efforts at drawing such

a society into international community were undertaken. Further, there are major differences among authoritarian societies both with respect to domestic conditions and relationships with the external world, including factors of scale, geopolitical circumstances, and external connections. Not all authoritarian states attract attention, whatever their domestic policies or external transgressions. Thus, a uniform policy is impossible. Nonetheless, over time, the U.S. government has leaned increasingly towards policies relying principally upon engagement, without totally abandoning containment as a bargaining chip and course of last resort.

How have the U.S. governmental attitudes toward the North Korea fitted into this larger pattern? First, it is to be noted that, in recent times, policies toward the DPRK were fashioned with broader concerns in mind. For Washington, the issue of nuclear proliferation took on particular significance in Northeast Asia. As a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, would a DPRK violation doom an admittedly imperfect but important global effort? Beyond this, would not a nuclear North Korea evoke major responses in the Republic of Korea and in Japan? Might it not also provide an additional obstacle to further curtailment of nuclear weaponry on the part of the major nuclear powers in this region?

In sum, in contrast to the ROK, the U.S. saw a global issue at stake in addition to its concerns about the immediate environment. Was the threat of DPRK nuclear weapons genuine? American official sources insisted that the evidence, including satellite surveillance, pointed to the extraction of sufficient plutonium to produce one or two nuclear devices, possibly more.

Certain Russian and Chinese sources exhibited greater doubts about the North's capacity to produce nuclear weapons. There could be no question, however, that in the nuclear issue the DPRK had a vitally important bargaining card to play in seeking to advance its *ostpolitik*, centering upon the United States.

The events affecting U.S. - DPRK relations that unfolded from 1991 onward must be viewed with these considerations in mind. By the early 1992, the United States and the ROK has made major overtures to the DPRK, with ground-based tactical nuclear weapons withdrawn from South Korean soil, Team Spirit military exercises suspended, and an initial high-level meeting between America and North Korean officials in New York. As reciprocal actions, the DPRK had negotiated the 25-Point Accord with the ROK, thereby pledging negotiations on the fullest range of issues between the two states, and also signed an agreement on a non-nuclear Korean peninsula, providing for further dialogue on this matter. In addition, the North had agreed to submit to full safeguard inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

At this point, there was great hope that North - South relations and U.S. - DPRK relations could advance together, with the nuclear issue resolved and the North encouraged to fulfill its expressed desire for economic reforms by entering into fuller relations with the major market economies. To be sure, there were apprehensions in some ROK circles. Despite the agreements reached in December, 1991, some South Koreans believed that the North had not given up its desire to drive a wedge between the ROK and the United States, and to undermine the Seoul government, playing exclusively to domestic opponents through

united front policies. Nonetheless, the atmosphere as 1992 opened was generally one of optimism. As is well known, the events that followed were to shake that optimism with indications that the road ahead was certain to be rocky and tortuous.

By the spring of 1993, both U.S. - DPRK and ROK - DPRK relations appeared to have returned to the "Cold War" status of earlier times. It was under these circumstances, that the United States began to initiate action in the United Nations for sanctions against the DPRK. It soon became apparent that this would not be an easy course. China made clear its opposition to sanctions, and without PRC enforcement, the effectiveness of sanctions would be more dubious. Moreover, while the ROK and Japan announced they would support such action if it were approved, both had concerns. South Korea had reason to worry that a high-level of North - South tension might stimulate the extremities of their domestic politics—the student militants on the Left and certain other elements—both military and civilian forces on the Right. Japan was concerned about the effect of sanctions on a portion of its Japanese - Korean community, and beyond this, on the general political environment at a time when politics at home were less stable.

In this situation, as in many others, the United States discovered that the creation and maintenance of an international coalition prepared to take firm action on behalf of some principle was not easy. North Korea, reacting bitterly to the sanctions efforts and the renewal of Team Spirit, threatened war, and while this threat was not taken seriously in most quarters, it was reflective of the general atmosphere. Nonethe-

less, the threat of sanctions, the specter of U.S. - ROK military preparations, and the dire domestic conditions in the DPRK constituted pressures on Pyongyang. After intensive negotiations, U.S. - DPRK Agreement was formally concluded on October 21, 1994 that once again promised a new era.

From the outset, this agreement has been controversial in the United States and the Republic of Korea. Critics contend that the U.S. gave away too much and received too little. They argue that to furnish the DPRK with initial oil supplies and later, facilities costing some four billion dollars, in exchange for a pledge to freeze on-going nuclear activities is to set a bad precedent for other wayward states.

They further assert that the North shows no indication of being genuinely interested in improving relations with the South, and that such recent moves, as those of ousting the Polish delegation of the UN Commission from its territory, and beyond this, seeking to scuttle the Commission in demanding an exclusive DPRK - U.S. agreement on a peace treaty, points to trouble ahead, as does the North's opposition to the South's role in furnishing new reactors. They point to the alleged diversion of some of the heavy oil furnished to unauthorized purposes as additional evidence of bad faith.

The Clinton administration's defense of the October Agreement upto this point has remained firm. It is not claimed that the agreement is perfect, but only that it is best among available alternatives. The imposition of sanctions earlier, it is asserted, would have divided rather than have united the forces necessary to achieve results with respect to the problem. This is not to say that sanctions or alternative negotiation measures will be

discarded as a future possibility if the agreement collapses, but their application must follow the best efforts of the U.S. and others to realize the objectives of the accord. It is also argued that the October Agreement does not rest on trust. Rather, it is based upon verification, and every measure taken rests upon that principle. Up to date, the North has abided by the terms of the October Agreement with respect to its program, as attested by the IAEA, and that agreement obligates the DPRK to go further than is required of NPT signatories.

As I speak, another critical point has been reached, with the outcome of the Korean discussion uncertain. The threat of the North to commence refueling and thereby begin the unraveling of the Accord rather than accept the predominant role of the Republic of Korea in furnishing light water reactors could produce another crisis, if it materialized. Washington and others would view such a development very seriously.

Some observers believe that the current stand of the North is one more evidence of brinkmanship and that a compromise or face-saving device can be found, enabling the light water reactors to be furnished with primary ROK involvement, both in terms of funding and equipment, but with the South's prominence less advertised. They assert that, understandably, the North is deeply worried over allowing its people to become familiar too quickly with the South's pre-eminence in technology, and its overall economic strength. Other observers are more pessimistic, believing that at least certain elements in the North are determined to prevent "contamination" from the South on such a scale, despite the overtures being made to ROK chaebol to invest in such areas as Rajin - Sonbong. Some believe that

the North will finally opt for a non-nuclear approach to its energy needs, seeking assistance for such a program. At this point in time, given the many uncertainties with respect both to the domestic situation in the DPRK and its appreciation of the international environment, it would be foolish to predict the future of U.S. - DPRK relations with confidence. The resumption of high-level talks lie ahead, with their outcome uncertain. Logic would dictate that the North would find the advantages of adhering to the October Accord so strong as to make any other course of action unthinkable. First, this accord provides for a new energy program at minimal cost to the North in place of one that was both expensive and virtually without external assistance in recent times.

A relaxation of the U.S. economic restraints, moreover, not only promises greater intercourse with American and other market economies, but can facilitate DPRK access to international economic facilities and entry into various organizations like APEC and the WTO. Already, the North has encouraged visits by American business representatives such as the delegation that went to the DPRK in February, 1995.

There are also significant strategic benefits to the DPRK. However friendly the relations with China may be, at least on the surface, and despite the recent efforts of Russia to improve its relations with Pyongyang, the North would like to offset its overly extensive reliance on the PRC and the long-term threat that it perceives from Japan. Indeed, the latter point has been made privately to Americans by North Korean spokesmen. When one lives in the near vicinity of two giants, it is comforting to have another, more distant giant involved. Korea—divided or

united—learned that lesson long ago, and in recent decades, it has been driven home to the North very painfully. Will Pyongyang set aside the opportunities now available to it?

Despite the logic that appears to rest on the side of going forward with the October accord, there are some factors that make for decided uncertainty. The internal situation in the DPRK remains clouded, at least for the outside world. It is now widely assumed that Kim Jong Il is the supreme authority, and that a challenge to his position in the near term would be very unlikely, given the enormous build-up accorded him over the past twenty years, and his legitimacy in traditional dynastic terms.

Yet, in addition to issues relating to his health and personality—which may or may not be of vital significance at this time—there are important issues relating to the power structure under Kim. A generational change in leadership is underway in the DPRK as in many other parts of Asia. It goes far beyond the succession at the top. The death of Marshal O Jin U is but one additional symbol of that fact. The younger generation of leaders are better educated and a significant core have been educated abroad, mostly in science and technology. They are presumably more firmly committed to modernization than their predecessors, being more cognizant of the deficiencies of the DPRK economy and its costs in terms of power as well as the people's livelihood. Yet, within the younger generations, what will be the distribution of power between the military and the civilian sectors? The military have always played a crucial role in the North, but in recent decades, it has been under the unchallengeable rule of Kim Il Song. Will Kim Jong Il have the

same power? It is clear that he has been focusing upon control of the military, but from outside, the results are not certain.

It is conceivable that “hardliners,” many of them in military ranks, might resist at any cost the “intrusion” of the South into the North’s vital center—and energy constitutes a part of that center. The South’s policies can probably influence this matter in the period ahead. Another cause of the failure of the October accord and deterioration again of U.S. - DPRK relations could be miscalculation on the part of the North’s leaders. Do they fully appreciate the complexities of American politics, and when brinkmanship oversteps the boundaries?

Meanwhile, there are a variety of scenarios projected for the DPRK future, each of which would affect relations with the U. S. and others. Some observers have predicted that sooner or later, the DPRK will undergo upheaval due to economic and political factors, with either a protracted factional struggle for power or a collapse in the fashion of the old East European regimes. In such an event, fulfillment of the October Accord might be either impossible or meaningless.

One cannot rule out this scenario in its variations, but the most dire possibility, collapse, does not seem to have a high probability, at least in the near future. Controls in the North appear firm. Grassroots resistance seems minimal, at least at present, and in any case, it has no organizational capacities. Survival is the primary objective of the elite, many elements of whom are tied together in kinship or patron-client relationships.

Another possible scenario would be that of abandoning the effort to turn out, and hunkering down in the fashion of Castro, determined to perpetuate the old order, with its reliance on

isolation, a Stalinist economic strategy, and the existing elite. This scenario also cannot be totally ruled out, but North Korea is not Cuba—it is a part of the Asian continent rather than an island; it has lost its “Father of the Revolution” and it has an economic system that in crucial parts is dependent upon external sources. Thus, the minimalist strategy seems to have little chance of success.

If, despite ultimatums, retreats and crises, the present course is ultimately continued, the DPRK is likely to evolve toward an authoritarian-pluralist system, with politics still highly constrained but a civil society gradually developing apart from the state and a mixed economy, with market forces increasingly prominent. In this context, relations with the United States and Japan, along with other nations, could gradually evolve toward normalcy.

From the vantage-point of the United States, such a course would be welcomed. The U.S. along with other nations would benefit, if North Korea could have a “soft-landing” moving into a wider orbit enabling both domestic transformation in an evolutionary fashion and less tension-ridden relations with others, especially the ROK. It is unthinkable that the United States would abandon South Korea, or neglect its concerns. Hence, whatever the timing and the pace, U.S. - DPRK relations and ROK - DPRK relations are closely intertwined.

In closing, one observation may be warranted. Whatever may evolve, the relations between the United States and the DPRK bring into play two nations that could not be more different. Moreover, their differences are obscured by the rhetoric of the age. Of the two nations, the United States is the truly

revolutionary force. It is in the U.S. that the massive changes induced by the latest waves of the scientific-technological revolution have affected mobility, life-style, culture and values. Here, huge generational differences now make their appearance, and many familiar moorings have been swept away. Not all aspects of the revolution are pleasant or reassuring—but the momentum is still rising, affecting every citizen in the land.

North Korea, on the other hand, despite Marxist rhetoric, is a deeply traditional society. Life is simple, and constrained by the limited consumer goods available. Mobility for the average citizen is very limited. Culture, carefully monitored, has been little altered. And a religious fervor is created around the supreme leader, very similar to ancient times. The contrast with South Korea today is striking.

How does a highly traditional society accommodate itself to the rapidly evolving world around it? How does it adjust without chaos or collapse? This is the question which the leaders of North Korea must ponder in the months and years ahead.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Discussions

Q Ms. Sook Young Moon (Reporter, KBS)

At the moment, the deadline for the nuclear reactor agreement is April 21. After that, North Korea is threatening to refuel the reactor in the North. In your view, what is the possibility of North Korea actually doing so, and what would be the response for doing that? Is it possible to try to apply sanctions in that case?

A Professor Scalapino

I only wish that my speech was being given three days from now. The timing is unfortunate. The latest word I have had is that the results from Berlin are still negative. As you know, the U.S. has stated that it does not consider April 21 a deadline in the official sense. I think all I can say now is that if Pyongyang goes ahead with the refueling that will create very serious consequences in Washington, particularly given the present construction of the American Congress, as for what measures might be ultimately taken. I want to emphasize that sanctions in the formal sense through the UN are not the only possible routes to take. These will not be foreclosed. However, there can be a whole set of agreements outside the U.S. among and between critical parties with respect to restraints in economic intercourse. I think the widest arena of options would be kept open. It is, I hope, possible that even if the Berlin talks are as

negative as they appear to be the case, this will not mean a breakdown of the October Accord, but simply a possibility of future negotiations at somewhat higher levels.

Q Dr. Georgi Toloraya (Minister, Russian Embassy)

Professor Scalapino, I would like to hear your opinion on the issue of light water reactors of South Korean origin. Suppose North Korea would agree on South Korea's role in this project, what could be the guarantees to Pyongyang that South Korea would not freeze this project under the pretext of some kind of difficulty in the inter-Korean relations? Who could give the guarantees?

A Professor Scalapino

I think this is a completely legitimate question. And, it seems to me that the guarantees must lie first in the Korea Energy Development Organization (KEDO) which is a multilateral body with the U.S. assuming a certain responsibility for fulfilling part of the agreement. I feel reasonably confident that with the U. S., Japan and South Korea, and hopefully, China and Russia participating in a collective approach, it would foreclose an independent decision on the part of anyone of the parties. I think this is a better option than depending on a single country it may be no matter which country, because bilateral relations can break down. If a multilateral agreement can be achieved, I think that is the best guarantee for North Korea.

Q Amb. Hans Grönwall (Swedish Ambassador)

Do you think there is any possibility for a third person, a prominent third person, to play any role in the future?

A Professor Scalapino

Well, I think Jimmy Carter is prepared to go back at any time. If the North Koreans were to signal that they would like a Carter II, I think Washington would take it seriously. On the other hand, both with respect to the prospect of a DRPK - ROK summit meeting between leaders and the kind of role Carter was able to play with Kim Il Song, I am not sure that the situation is propitious for this in Pyongyang in the present time. However, that is a decision they would have to make.

Q Dr. Yong Ho Kim (Professor, IFANS)

In order for Korea to expedite obtaining the agreement on the light water reactor issue, I would like to ask whether you think it is desirable for Washington to open a liaison office in North Korea. Do you think the timing is suitable and desirable in view of the difficulty involving the light water reactor problem?

A Professor Scalapino

As you know, a part of the October Accord related to moving toward establishing liaison offices and very preliminary steps have been taken. I would think it would be difficult to move

down that road very far, if there were indications that the October accord was in the process of being violated or dismantled.

A more logical course in that event would be to raise the level of the dialogue whether in Berlin or Geneva or in New York. I doubt very much that in an atmosphere where events seem to be worsening, one could move ahead with the actual establishment of liaison offices. But, I do not think that would preclude higher level negotiations. As you probably know, negotiations are being conducted at a relatively low level. The level can be raised, but I don't think the timing is right for liaison offices.

Q Dr. Hong-Choo Hyun (Senior Advisor, Kim & Chang ;
Former Korean Ambassador to the U.S.)

First, considering North Korea's reluctance to go on with dialogue with the South Korean government and make adaptation to reality, don't you think the U.S. and Korea might want to change its strategy towards North Korea? For instance, what about the possibility of freezing negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea for a while until we see some progress in their attitude. While doing so, in preparation for the repetition of remarks such as "South Korea will become a sea of fire," what about building up our military capability, whether it be conventional or non-conventional? Further, instead of going to the UN for sanctions, what about instead forming a united front with the U.S. and Japan which would encourage North Korea to become more adaptable to reality?

The other question is China's possible constructive role in resolving this issue particularly in view of their own political problems.

A Professor Scalapino

My former students always ask me the most difficult questions. I think that it is very difficult to freeze the situation. We are in a certain dynamic situation, and we must respond in one fashion or another to the actions of the other. I would question the concept that one can hold the present intact. For example, if indeed the refueling takes place, there certainly would be repercussions in Washington and elsewhere. Doing nothing is not possible. I think the further issue you pose in this question is important. I agree with the thrust of your remarks. Namely, I think this is the time for continuous discussion among the parties most deeply involved in this problem. I would encompass in this discussion all four major states—U.S., China, Japan and Russia plus South Korea.

My view is that irrespective of the issue, we are in the period today where you cannot have a uniform global or regional approach to any given regional or global crisis. Rather you must form around the problem what I call "concentric arcs" that can interact with each other. In the case of Korea, it seems to me that the most immediate arc must be, in the long run, North and South relations. And, I fully agree with the thesis that the U.S. must not cease to emphasize the primacy of that relationship and its need to be correlated with what U.S. - DPRK relations are. But, above the North - South relations has been,

for some years, the action and inactions of the four major parties. What they have done and not done has been crucial to the issues of the Korean peninsula. Therefore, there ought to be the closest interaction within the circle of major powers as well as liaison with the South. At some point, international agencies, both economic and security, can come into play and indeed already are, on a modest scales. I think this is the only realistic approach and it seems to me that if we can get some degree of agreement on that front and among the four major states, we can make progress. There are different perspectives of national interest and strategies of approach. In the past, we have worked with some harmony and I hope they can be continued.

