

Reflections on Korean history and its impacts on the US-North Korean conflict

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In the author's view, nothing in the political behavior of Korean policy (North as well as South) can be understood without reflecting upon the experience of the Korean Peninsula and its people under the policy of the Great Powers. As expressed in the following pages, the author is of the opinion, that one of the main reasons of the radicalisation of the US – and North Korean – policy is the underestimation of the meaning of Korean history before and after its division.

As Richard N. Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations and a former member of the White House policy planning staff, stated in a speech concerning US foreign policy '[...] government officials rarely, if ever, have time to ponder history or look too far ahead' [1].

The present discussion about the events that have taken place in the Korean Peninsula is based on a broad agenda, ranging from the process of inter-Korean rapprochement, the relationship this region holds to its former occupier Japan, and the conflict about North Korea's nuclear and missile programme. Without underestimating the importance of any of these issues, the discussion about the North Korean nuclear problem is the 'hot spot' of the international community's attention. As far as many analysts are concerned, the reason for the escalation of this conflict is mainly due to the behavior of North Korea itself. On the other hand, however, there are numerous indicators that show that US policy towards the Korean Peninsula in the past is also responsible for the situation in North Korea that we face today.

The conflict between the United States and North Korea is primarily focused on two issues, namely, the North Korean nuclear programme and the development of ballistic missiles. In search for an explanation for the problem, one often encounters the statement that a solution can only be found if North Korea is willing to implement significant political and economic reforms. Therefore many road maps for North Korea have been worked out, describing precise steps for North Korean reforms. In recognition of the common opinion that a change in Pyongyang's policy is necessary, I am of the view that another major point

why the US policy towards North Korea has often failed is the lack of understanding of Korean history. Under the administration of George W. Bush and its declared policy of regime change, it became quite more difficult to ease the mistrust between the governments in Washington and Pyongyang.

In the following pages, I will argue that a solution to the North Korean nuclear issue will only be possible if the political decisionmakers in the United States are able and – even more – willing to understand that this conflict is embedded not only in a North Korean policy of one-sided brinkmanship, but also in the absence of a broad knowledge of Korean history and its meanings for the Korean people by US officials.

The origins

As historians and analysts have figured out, the opening of the Korean Peninsula toward the world was not a peaceful process but rather a forceful one. In the beginning, it was the economic interest of the western powers in this region (e.g. Great Britain, United States, France and Germany) and the military rivalry between China, Russia and Japan, which pushed Korea into the world community [2].

US and Korea diplomatic relations commenced in June 1882 with the signing of a commercial treaty between the two nations, which also included a provision to render mutual good services in case of aggression by a third state. Don Oberdorfer, author of the book *The Two Koreas*, wrote on this:

In 1882, as a defensive measure against its neighbors, Korea signed a “Treaty of Amity and Commerce” with the United States, its first with a Western power, in which the United States promised to provide “good offices” in the event of external threat. It was reported that the Korean king danced with joy when the first American minister to Korea arrived [3].

The development on the Korean Peninsula during the period surrounding the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce was dominated by the struggle of supremacy over the region between China, Russia and Japan. It would thus seem that, being under enormous pressure from its direct neighbours, the Korean government was eager to find a potential ally which could mediate in case of a foreign aggression.

Matters occurred, however, in a different way. The United States managed a policy towards Korea aimed at securing their interests without getting directly involved in military action. In July 1905, during the Japanese-Russian war, the United States and Japan signed the so-called Taft-Katsura Agreement. In this secretly signed treaty, the United States assented to Japanese dominance in Korea; in return, Japan agreed to the US presence in Hawaii and the Philippines [4].

With regard to its meanings for the Korean peninsula, the Taft-Katsura Agreement stood in clear opposition to the treaty signed previously between the United States and Korea. Of course, the Korean government was hardly shocked by the US-Japanese contract and made huge efforts to reverse it, although without much hope of success.

A remarkable point in this respect is that the Taft-Katsura Agreement was signed before the peace treaty between Russia and Japan (Treaty of Portsmouth), which was signed in August 1905, one month after the Taft-Katsura Agreement. Furthermore, the drafting of the Treaty of

Portsmouth occurred under the scrutiny of President Theodore Roosevelt and was therefore strongly influenced by the United States. In 1906 Roosevelt was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his mediation between Japan and Russia.

With all due respect to his achievement, Roosevelt must have realised, that the Treaty of Portsmouth was completely at the expense of the Korean Peninsula. Bearing the Taft-Katsura Agreement in mind, it is therefore hard to characterise the Treaty of Portsmouth as a fair one: The future of a sovereign Korea was not mentioned in any way; on the contrary, the destiny of Korea was guided by a complex netting of interests, delegating control over Korea to the hands of the Japanese.

After defeating China in 1895 and Russia in 1905, Japan became the major and most influential power on the Korean Peninsula. The Treaty of Portsmouth between Japan and Russia guaranteed Japan's interests on the Korean Peninsula and established its role as sovereign over the region. With this treaty not only the victory over Russia but also the Japanese control over the Korean Peninsula was sealed.

In historical retrospective, it was not only the United States who enabled Japan to gain full power over the Korean Peninsula. Many of the western governments also saw the possibility to combine a controlled Japanese colonialism with their own local interests by accepting the Japanese dominance on the Korean Peninsula and Manchuria [5]. The implementation of double standard contract systems between the parties was very useful. In the fighting of potential influence in the region and the protection of own interests, it was the western community as a whole who played a major part in strengthening the process of Japanese dominance on the Korean Peninsula.

In his book *Korea's Place in the Sun*, Bruce Cumings, an expert in Korean history voices on this:

If Japan had a free hand, it also had a helping hand. It is a sad fact, but a fact, that almost every Westerner supported Japan's "modernizing role" in Korea [6].

In regard to the process of US-Korean relations, the Taft-Katsura Agreement and the doubtful role of the United States during the settlement of the Treaty of Portsmouth can be interpreted as the cornerstone for Korean reluctance toward the reliability of US foreign policy. With the signing of the Taft-Katsura Agreement, the United States and Japan came to a gentlemen-agreement that accelerated the loss of Korean sovereignty. This agreement gave Japan a free hand over the Korean Peninsula in exchange for American freedom of action in Hawaii and the Philippines. As a result of the Treaty of Portsmouth, Korea was under Japanese occupation for almost four decades [7].

Without going into historical details, there was hope for the Korean people to regain their full sovereignty towards the end of World War II. In August 1945, Japan was forced to surrender after the airdrop of atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki [8]. The 'liberation' of the Korean Peninsula started by Soviet troops from the north and later by American troops from the south. The thirty-eighth parallel line became the line of demarcation between the two allies. But instead of becoming a free and sovereign country, the Korean Peninsula was once again put under pressure. This time, it was the upcoming rivalry between the two major world superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States of America, which would shape Korea's history. Don Oberdorfer on this:

Thus Korea came to be divided into two “temporary” zones of occupation that, as the cold war deepened, became the sites of two antagonistic Korean regimes based on diametrically opposed principles and sponsors [9].

The political infiltration from the two so-called liberators in their sectors and the increasing radicalisation of Korean civil society and its leaders resulted in the division of the Peninsula into two sovereign states in 1948. The two Koreas, notably the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), started their new life in dependence of their military and political protectors, the United States, the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China and in a atmosphere of the growing tensions between East and West [10].

In this respect, the following war between North and South Korea cannot be described only as an inter-Korean war. Started in June 1950 by the military aggression from the North with the goal to reach reunification by force, it became clear very quickly that the reasons and developments of this war would be strongly characterised by the systemic confrontation between communism and capitalism. As Bruce Cumings stated, the war originated from multiple causes [11]. One of them, and clearly identifiable as a mistake on the part of the Americans, was the fact that after the liberation from Japanese occupation the United States took over most of the political and administrative structures established by the Japanese [12]. Therefore, many Koreans saw the US policy with critical eyes. This fact played a major role in North Korean agitation, blaming the United States as the same brand of imperialists as the Japanese, justifying the following war as one of liberation from the new imperialists.

Indications of the systemic confrontation were already noticeable before foreign military forces joined the war. The passing of a resolution by the United Nations Security Council on June 27th to condemn the North Korean aggression and to support military action to strike back was only made possible by the Soviet Union boycott towards the United Nations during that time [13]. After the multilateral troops of the United Nations under US leadership had pushed back the North Korean forces and entered North Korean territory up to the People’s Republic of China’s boarder, the total character of a representative war came out, when China joined the war in October 1950 [14]. From this point onwards it was obvious to everybody that this war was not only a result of the intra-Korean confrontation but also a consequence of the spreading systemic struggle between East and West.

The progress of the war is not part of this paper but it is important to mention that its course was characterised by disastrous military actions in every part of the peninsula. With the intervention of the People’s Republic of China, the situation for the United States and its allies became increasingly difficult. With support from China, the North Korean troops reversed the situation and occupied southern territory again. As known today, the American fear to lose the war led to the US government consideration to use nuclear bombs again to prevent a communist victory over the whole Korean Peninsula. Those considerations arose particularly when communist troops from North Korea and China regained control over Seoul in December 1950.

In this discussion it was not quite clear whether the use of nuclear bombs should be provided as limited strikes against the People’s Republic of China to stop their engagement or to the Korean Peninsula itself. The literature on these considerations and their circumstances

make it quite clear that the participants had no idea about the real consequences of such strikes [15].

Nevertheless there had been taken different actions by the United States to establish the capability to use nuclear weapons. Some of them were simulation tests of atomic bombings, undertaken by B-29 bombers flying over North Korea, in October 1951. Even if they used dummies instead of real nuclear bombs, Bruce Cumings pointed out correctly that

one may imagine the steel nerves required of leaders in Pyongyang, observing a lone B-29 simulating the attack lines that had resulted in the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki just five years earlier, each time unsure whether the bomb was real or a dummy [16].

That finally no nuclear weapons were used was mostly due to the fact that the war front was stabilised by the United States and its allies and that the Soviet Union did not enter the war.

Regarding the massive military use of air-bombing by the United States (including the use of napalm) it is quite obvious that not only the government in Pyongyang but also the North Korean population have no good memories of US foreign policy. Linking the US capability to use nuclear weapons in the Korean War and the present debate on the North Korean nuclear programme, Michael J. Mazarr stated that:

The United States thus exposed North Korea, during its infancy as a nation, to the fearsome power and enormous political value of nuclear weapons. The lesson was apparently not lost on North Korea's leaders, and early U.S. nuclear threats are one important thread in the tapestry of the North's motives for a nuclear program [17].

The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs showed to the world that conflicts in the 20th century could be decided within seconds [18]. This experience and the possibility that those weapons could decide a war again left a deep impression on the North Korean government and its population. Furthermore the US foreign policy on the Korean Peninsula made it almost unnecessary for Pyongyang to spread the impression of a brutal and arrogant America: the behaviour of the United States spoke for itself. Until today, the sorrows of the Korean War have a special meaning to the North Korean resentments against the United States. With the American considerations about the use of nuclear force during the Korean War, the nuclear issue touched ground in this region for the first time.

The Korean War started with the goal of reunification by military force and ended with hundreds of thousand of deaths and a nearly totally devastated peninsula in July 1953. Since the end of the Korean War, the development on the Korean Peninsula passed a lot of critical situations. In the succeeding years, the ongoing Cold War seemed to make it impossible for the two Koreas to start a policy of conciliation and to smooth the way for reunification.

In February 1972, the then US President Richard Nixon visited the People's Republic of China and announced a new American foreign policy which contained an Sino-American alliance against Soviet dominance. This announcement was also described as the Nixon-Shock. The governments in Seoul and Tokyo were particularly astonished by this policy change. But

the fact that they hadn't been informed or consulted at any point before was much more offending than the policy change itself and equal to a loss of face [19].

As a result of the announcement, and due to their relations to the two parties (the United States and the People's Republic of China) North and South Korea were forced to react. This happened in the form of a common manifest between the two Koreas in July 1972. But after a short period of great hopes, it became clear that a lasting improvement in the inter-Korean relationship could only be achieved through diplomacy of mutual information and consultation and not with forced reactions as a result of unilateral political steps by one of the major powers in the region.

While the Republic of Korea became part of the western community and one of the major economic powers in the region during the upcoming years, the DPRK seemed to become totally isolated with the political changes in the early nineties. The decline of Soviet Union, the German reunification, the collapse of former 'brother-states' in Eastern-Europe, and the reform process in China, left deep uncertainty in North Korea's leadership.

Since the detection of the first indigenous North Korean reactor in the early eighties by US spy satellites, the attention of the world community has focused on the question of whether North Korea is using its nuclear facilities to produce military-grade nuclear material. In a decade where the loss of important economic partnerships and ongoing natural disasters has brought Pyongyang into a position where the government was not able to secure the nutrition of its own population, it was quite logical that North Korea used the uncertainty of the world community about the status of its nuclear programme to broaden its clearance in gaining economic support without losing political control over the country.

One step forward, two steps back

Although the problem seemed to have been solved in 1994 through the Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea, the situation remains critical. The implementation and validity of the Framework was interrupted several times, and since George W. Bush junior took power in 2001 all the attempts forged during William Clinton's administration as well as under the sunshine policy of Kim Dae-Jung have evaporated. Disregarding its counter-productive meanings, the new government in Washington cancelled the existing roundtables with Pyongyang, announcing a policy review on North Korea for the next months.

The decision to cancel the talks with North Korea was again made without any arrangement. In January 2002, under the impression of the 9/11 attacks, George W. Bush called North Korea part of an 'axis of evil,' that supported terrorists and the spreading of weapons of mass destruction. The visit of the American diplomat James Kelly in October 2002 made the situation boil after he accused North Korea of keeping a secret military nuclear programme. When he returned to the United States, Kelly stated that the officials in Pyongyang confessed such a programme. Since then, the situation has deteriorated and the six-party talks between People's Republic of China, South Korea, North Korea, the United States of America, the Russian Federation and Japan, which started in August 2003 as a result of North Korea's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, have shown little progress.

Washington made clear that it is not willing to engage with North Korea until Pyongyang's leadership stops its military nuclear programme. In case of new negotiations, the United States

would also like to discuss a broader agenda, referring not only to the nuclear issue, but also to the North Korean missile programme and some topics of human rights. North Korea, in contrast, is not willing to accept preconditions or to discuss different issues as a whole diplomatic package.

Meanings for the moment

From the North Korean point of view, the role of the United States as an imperialistic aggressor on the Korean Peninsula has never changed. With its faults in diplomatic behaviour it will be very difficult for the present US administration to re-open a direct channel with North Korea. Furthermore, with its policy towards Iraq, it must be clear for Washington that there is no reason for North Korea to trust US offers. Some observers have argued that Iraq was invaded by the United States only because it was not able to use the threat of nuclear weapons and that this provides a motive for North Korea to pursue a military nuclear programme.

As far as the missile issue is concerned, it is obvious that the monetary aspect is the major impulse for the programme. Selling missile technology is one of the few fields of North Korean industry that can ensure foreign exchange. It should also be clear that the ballistic missiles stationed in North Korea pose a serious threat to South Korea and in a certain way also to Japan. Beyond it, the lasting extension of the ballistic missile programme can also lead to disorientation in Beijing and Moscow. The question, whether North Korea is able to develop long-range ballistic missiles, which could threaten US territory, cannot be answered easily. It is fairly uncertain whether the North Koreans can master the difficult process of the electronic steering-control mechanisms of those missiles. So if there is in fact a threat to the United States, it affects the US soldiers stationed on the Korean Peninsula and Japan but not US homeland.

Unlike the missile issue, the impulses for the North Korean nuclear programme must be seen in a different context. Historically, the use of the atomic bomb in World War II most certainly impressed the North Korean leadership. The Cold War and its policy of nuclear deterrence could also have been a signal for North Korea that the possession of nuclear weapons prevents a foreign attack. As long as North Korea seemed to be protected by its allies (the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union) there was no urgent need for North Korea to start a military nuclear programme of their own. But after the events of the early nineties, which led to the collapse of the iron curtain, the need to develop nuclear weapons came into the considerations of Pyongyang as a means to ensure its political survival. In contrast to the missile programme, the nuclear programme must be understood in its historical dimensions and should therefore be seen primarily as a tactical instrument. This follows from a general problem related to nuclear technology, namely, that programmes for civil benefits can be readily transformed into military projects (the so called problem of 'dual-use'). In this sense, it has for years been difficult to say whether the North Korean nuclear programme contained military use. Only inspections by a neutral side or disclosures from the North Korean side are cable of answering this question. The secluded policy of North Korea in that respect is well known. In September 2004, North Korea said it had turned plutonium from 8,000 spent fuel rods into nuclear weapons.

The invasion of Iraq has surely shown the North Korean leadership that the United States are willing to enforce their political ideas even if the purported rationale is not entirely

legitimated. The accusation that Iraq was in possession of biological and chemical weapons was not true, and to every expert who was informed about the work of the United Nations arms-inspectors in Iraq after the second Gulf War in 1991 it was clear before the invasion that the Iraqi threat as stated by Washington was not a realistic one but rather an overestimation. As a result of the US policy under George W. Bush, there have been no inspections in North Korean nuclear facilities since the diplomatic escalations of October 2002. It therefore lies within the responsibility of the global community – including the United States – to seek political measures which can solve the nuclear issue in North Korea. The historical burden of the United States on the Korean Peninsula and the political behavior of the present administration in Washington have an enormous impact on the fact that policy towards North Korea is failing on a continuous basis.

Conclusion

As I have tried to point out, a peaceful solution for the North Korean problem will probably not be found by waiting for regime collapse, regime change, or by forcing North Korea to one-sided reforms. The international community and especially the United States must accept that this policy will only lead to a further escalation of the situation and increase the possibility of military confrontation. The historical perspective shows that one-sided accusations for the situation, no matter in which direction, do not reflect the historical facts. The problem cannot be solved without a wide understanding of Korean history in general. For the future, it is important for the administration in Washington to realise that dealing with the Korean Peninsula in a responsible way means to consider the region's wider historical dimensions.

Notes

1. Richard N. Haass, Defining U.S. foreign policy in a post-post-cold war world, 22 April 2002, The 2002 Arthur Ross Lecture, Remarks to Foreign Policy Association. (<http://www.state.gov/s/p/rem/9632.htm>).
 2. An excellent insight into Korean History and the beginning of the involvement of the world's community is provided by Angus Hamilton, *Korea: Das Land des Morgenrots*, London, 1904.
 3. Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, Indianapolis, 2001, p. 4.
 4. With the US victory in the war against Spain in December 1898, the United States became protectors of Cuba, Guam, the Philippines and Hawaii. Since Theodore Roosevelt became President in 1901, the United States seemed to be more interested to consolidate its power in their new protectorates, than risking a struggle with Japan over Korea.
 5. For example, Great Britain signed a treaty with Japan in 1902, wherein they acknowledged the special interests on the Korean Peninsula by the Japanese.
 6. Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*, New York, 1998, p. 142.
 7. Even if the annexation-treaty between Japan and Korea was signed in 1910 it is quite clear, that the factual overlook of Korean policy by the Japanese came with the 'Treaty of Portsmouth' and the 'Taft-Katsura Agreement' in 1905.
 8. In the historical perspective, the question, whether the drop of the atomic bomb was necessary from the military point of view, to defeat Japan, caused heated debates among experts. Today, it is common sense, that the drop of the bombs was more a political act to demonstrate military power, than a military necessity.
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9. See [3, p. 7].
 10. In October 1949, the People's Republic of China was founded by Mao Tse-Tung. The victory by the communist versus the nationalists in China was a political shock to the United States. Historically it was the logical consequence after the partnership of convenience between the Chinese communists and nationalists during the war against Japan from 1937 and 1945. With the capitulation of Japan this partnership became obsolete.
 11. Regarding this fact, Bruce Cumings argues in his book *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* '... that civil wars do not start: they come' (p. 238).
 12. In the north, the Japanese administration system has been totally destroyed by the soviets.
 13. The boycott of the United Nations by the Soviet Union was a result of the soviet protest against the fact that the state of China was represented in the United Nations by the Chinese government in Taiwan and not by Beijing. The legality of the UN resolution was often criticised by the Soviet Union afterwards.
 14. Officially, the Chinese fighters were declared as spontaneous units, so that there never has been an official war declaration from Beijing.
 15. About the use of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula and its impacts see Michael J. Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb: A Case Study in Nonproliferation*, Harrisonburg, 1997, pp. 15-34; Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*, New York, 1998, pp. 288-298; and Roger Dingman, *Atomic diplomacy during the Korean war*, *International Security* 13 (1988/89, no. 3, Winter) 60-86.
 16. See [6, p. 293].
 17. Michael J. Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb: A Case Study in Nonproliferation*, Harrisonburg, 1997, p. 16.
 18. Concerning the beginnings of the US nuclear policy see, e.g., Arjun Makhijani, *Nuclear targeting: The first 60 years*, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (2003, May/June) 60-65.
 19. The visit was secretly prepared by the then special adviser Henry Kissinger. In regard to the discussion about the unilateral policy of the United States today, this period in world policy gives an excellent example that changes in US foreign policy have been almost made without arrangement.
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