

Korea: Unfinished Business of the Twentieth Century*

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Fifty years ago, July 1953, the Korean War ended. The Armistice is still to be converted into a peace treaty, and today fear of renewed war grows. In Japan, the widespread belief that Kim Jong Il is planning a missile attack prompts fundamental legal and administrative reforms to enable Japan to respond, perhaps preemptively. North Korea, though armed to the teeth, however, has not attacked anybody in fifty years, faces explicit threats from the United States, and insists it wants only to survive. The question is this: is North Korea “a porcupine in the forest repelling aggression,” or “a tiger hunting rapaciously in the jungle”?¹⁾ Appearing on Japanese television on June 20, Kim Jong Il’s former mentor, and from 1997 as a defector in Seoul Kim’s sworn enemy, Hwang Jang Yop, said it was absurd to imagine Kim Jong Il attacking Japan.²⁾ Better informed than most, Hwang favored the porcupine theory.

North Korea certainly looks forbidding. The images chosen for endless repetition on international television — goose-stepping soldiers and enormous missiles being paraded through Pyongyang, white-coated technicians twiddling the knobs on an antiquated-looking nuclear facility, children performing mass games, skinny and robot-like, the pudgy leader, starving infants, desperate refugees — reinforce the sense that it is a bizarre place, beyond the ken of the modern world.

It belongs to no “axis”, but plainly is a rogue state: marked internally by prison camps, public executions, surveillance, mobilization, seclusion and misgovernment, externally by narcotic trading, counterfeiting, smuggling, abductions, spy ships, nuclear weapons. It may indeed have committed almost every crime in the book and has few if any defenders. Many states commit crimes, however. What is unusual about North Korea is that it has admitted and apologized for at least some of its crimes, and few states do that. Kim Jong Il presumably hoped to clear the slate and move towards comprehensive normalization, but his apology instead attracted a torrent of abuse.

The Western image of North Korea as brutal and beyond the pale is rooted in the Korean war of 1950 to 1953. It is now clear that that war, although certainly started by greatest atrocities were those committed, firstly by South Korea and the US — at Nogunri, Taejon and elsewhere — then with US devastation of dams, power stations, and the infrastructure of social life in breach of international law. In other words, if it

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was a terror war much of the terror was inflicted by the forces acting in the name of the UN.

There is little prospect that North Korea can accomplish normalcy as a state until its relations with the US and Japan are normalized. Yet both the US and Japan insist that North Korea normalize itself as a condition for that other normalization, of inter-state relationships. North Korea is entrapped in Joseph Heller's "Catch 22."

The rationale of the North Korean state for sixty years has been its anti-Japanese guerilla mystique and principle. But the Korean War meant that DPRK has never demobilized, and so it remains an anachronism: permeated in the twenty-first century still by the guerilla qualities of secrecy, monolithism, xenophobia and leader-worship. Only when peace is reached with Japan and the United States can there be any prospect of these structures being dissolved.

Paradoxically, in surviving 100 years of confrontation with two powerful enemies, North Korea has come to resemble them both. Like Japan in the last stages of the Pacific War, embattled, desperate to survive, ready to sacrifice almost anything but clinging desperately to one core value — *kokutai*, literally the "national polity" (in fact the emperor system) North Korea today likewise has a single demand: survival of its polity and its leader. The Dear Leader Kim Jong Il, like his father, Kim Il Sung, before him, is worshipped, his image revered, his words treated as sacred script, the state equated with him and his family, as the Japanese state of the 1930s and early 1940s was equated with the emperor and his family. In Japan, the emperor was preserved, and everything else changed. The optimistic scenario for North Korea would be that if it is offered a similar, face-saving path, much could be renewed behind it.

The September 17, 2002 Pyongyang Declaration, following the Japanese Prime Minister's visit to Pyongyang, while flawed, was a historic development, highlighting a readiness for change in Pyongyang and Tokyo. The promise of that meeting was quickly cut short, however, as a remarkable orchestrated campaign of fear and loathing for North Korea swept the Japanese media. Korea in the twenty-first century is becoming the fulcrum for transformation of the Japanese state as did Korea in the late nineteenth century. The proponents of forced regime change in North Korea, now dominant in state, media, and people, believe there can be no resolution of matters at issue with North Korea so long as the present government remains in Pyongyang. War is a prospect they face with equanimity.

As for its current nemesis, the United States, both North Korea and the US are in a sense "outlaw states:" global superpower and impoverished Asian country, they treat law and treaty primarily as instrument to achieve of their own purpose, trust nothing so much as military force and seem obsessed with nuclear weaponry and other weapons of mass destruction. The US brandishing of its nuclear threat for half a century has generated a North Korea that believes only possession of nuclear weapons can guarantee it from attack.

Pyongyang's language is shrill to the point of being almost incomprehensible. For Pyongyang to talk and act as if it were an equal seems brazen, provocative and threatening. However, such "over-reaction" is structurally conditioned. Facing the concentrated hostility of the global superpower and bereft of any significant diplomatic support, it is natural to try to cover weakness and fear by resort to bluster, provocative

language and aggressive gesture.

Pyongyang does not dispute that the Korean peninsula should be de-nuclearized, but it points out that it has been on the receiving end of nuclear threat for more than fifty years, and the world showed absolutely no interest. The five Security Council states that officially possess nuclear weapons assumed the solemn obligation under the NPT to not make nuclear threats against non-nuclear states and to take steps towards elimination of their own weapons. The US is plainly in breach on both counts: during the Korean War it was restrained from nuclear onslaught on North Korea only by fear of possible Soviet retaliation; thereafter, during the Cold War it maintained a stock of nuclear weapons just south of the DMZ until 1991 when South Korea insisted on their removal; since then it has continued regular war-games centered around their use. It includes North Korea on its list of nuclear target states and Congress recently authorized research on a new generation of mini-nukes — bunker busters — designed for North Korea's deep underground installations. If North Korea's behavior sometimes seems sometimes slightly mad, it is worth recalling that its people have survived for fifty years something other peoples can scarcely even imagine: the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Nuclear hypocrisy is taken for granted in the case of the superpowers. While Washington demands that other nations disavow any nuclear plans and abide by the NPT, the US itself withdraws from the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Biological Weapons Convention, signals its intent to pursue nuclear hegemony including the domination of space, deploys as “conventional weapons” newly developed weapons of terror and mass destruction including cluster bombs, “daisy cutters” and depleted uranium tipped shells, and works to develop the new generation of nuclear “bunker buster” bombs. None of this, however, is “roguish” or “evil,” apparently because it is covered by imperial prerogative.

While the Japanese and US approaches to North Korea, based on intimidation, ultimatum, and the threat of force, steadily escalate tension, South Korea persists in its quite different, “sunshine” approach, favoring dialogue, stressing national unity, fostering economic, cultural and other contacts. Its greatest success has been the restoration of the South-North railway connection. Services can only be resumed, however, when the US consents.

“Sunshine” is clearly welcome to a North Korea seeking a way to come in from the cold.” In the wake of September 11 it promptly ratified the international anti-terror conventions and it has begun to recognize and report on its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It has been struggling for over a decade to re-engage its economy with the world. However, economic reform and political liberalization are impossible so long as it faces continuing security threats and continues to be denied access to international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF — to which the US holds the keys.

The problem is not only one of the recalcitrance, violence or madness of North Korea, but of the arrogance, preemptive unilateralism, and rejection of international law by the United States, and the self-righteousness, irresponsibility, and studied historical amnesia of Japan. North Korea should be entitled not only to the guarantee of its existence for which it pleads, and that the rest of the world treats with something

akin to contempt, but to an apology from the US for the brutal and criminal nature of its war on Korea fifty years ago and the nuclear terror it has maintained ever since. To resolve the North Korean problem calls for the righting of 100 years of wrongs, those of Japanese colonialism, then those of American nuclear intimidation. The twenty-first century in Northeast Asia can properly begin when those wrongs from the twentieth are righted.

Notes:

- 1) Marcus Noland, *Avoiding the Apocalypse: The Future of the Two Koreas*, International Economic Institute, 2000, p. 350.
- 2) "Newsstation," TV Asahi, 20 June 2003.