

Relaxation of International Tensions: Special Reference to the Korean Peninsula*

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I. Introduction

The Korean peninsula has had a central place in the politics of East Asia over the past hundred years. Partitioned after World War II by a combination of ignorance, inadvertance and great power design, the hatreds created by local power struggles (backed by outside support for rival Korean governments) and intensified by the Korean War make it the scene of one of the most bitter cold-war rivalries facing any of the divided nations.⁽¹⁾

In spite of the efforts at dialogue in the last few years, the fierce antagonism between North and South Korea remains; the Korean peninsula represents one of the world's most dangerous potential flashpoints for large-scale conflict. Any outbreak of hostilities could involve the U.S., China and the U.S.S.R., all of whom are bound by separate treaties to the defense of the two Koreas, in direct armed confrontation.

Despite some easing of tensions in recent

years, there remain many uncertainties and explosive possibilities involving this sensitive and heavily armed area, which has over 1,000,000 men under arms out of the approximately 50,000,000 people on the peninsula. Moreover, each has large reserve units, and a militia larger than its regular and reserve forces combined.

In any case, high levels of military preparedness have placed heavy economic as well as political burdens on both societies. However, the North-South Korean relations have been characterized by a quasi-state of war with occasional border clashes along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), aggravated by North Korea's armed provocations, espionage infiltrations and guerilla activities.

The Korean peninsula is regarded as strategically important by the four big powers in order to preserve their power leverage for stability in Northeast Asia. Moreover, in a period of detente during the 1970s, there have developed competitive relationships among the four major powers—the U.S., the Soviet Union,

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(1) Barnds, William J. (ed.), *The Two Koreas in East Asian Affairs*, New York University Press, New York, 1976, p.4.

Scalapino, Robert A., *Asia and the Road Ahead: Issues for the Major Powers*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975, p.10.

China and Japan. Realizing the changing realities of multipolar international politics, each of these powers has readjusted its position and thus developed new policy thinking and strategies.

However, the four-power equilibrium is not so much a system as a residual product of interacting foreign policies. For this reason it will remain uncertain and precarious. The future developments on the Korean peninsula where the strategic interests of the major powers intersect cannot escape the effect of uncertain regional politics, and inter-Korean relations will inevitably evolve in the context of such regional power politics.

II. Military and Economic Background

One important consideration in determining North Korea's military posture is the changing Soviet Union and Chinese attitude toward the Korean problems. Although the two Communist powers publicly support North Korea's position, they will continue to support the status quo and oppose any radical change in the Korean peninsula by force. They will not support a war by North Korea, since they see no political benefit to be derived from such a conflict. The Soviet Union fears that a war would result in providing the opportunity for the expansion of the Chinese-dominant influence in North Korea and that its own involvement would certainly undermine U.S.—Soviet detente while encouraging a closer Sino-

American relationship. The present Chinese leadership also perceives that its involvement in a Korean war would not only destroy Sino-American detente, but also would invite the expansion of Soviet influence over North Korea.⁽²⁾

Soviet and Chinese military and economic assistance to North Korea has substantially declined in recent years. In this situation North Korea has come to realize that it would be difficult to gain their support for any aggression into the South. Such an assessment of the Sino-Soviet attitude has led to a strengthening of its military posture. North Korea maintains the fifth largest military power in the world; it continues to spend an estimated 16.7% of its GNP on military expenditure and about 12% of working-age males are in the regular armed forces.⁽³⁾

Thus, one wonders whether North Korea might have the capability of waging war without the support of its allies, the Soviet Union and China. According to an estimate of the U.S. Department of Defense, North Korea has the capability of sustaining their offensive for three months without receiving the logistical support of its allies.⁽⁴⁾

On a tactical level, the aims of North Korea have been summarized as follows:

- 1) attempt to build an underground movement in the South;
- 2) institute commando-type operations throughout South Korea;
- 3) devise the means to carry out a Vietnam-type operation based upon political considerations and preparation.⁽⁵⁾

(2) Barnett, A. Doak, *China and the Major Powers in East Asia*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1977, p. 146.

(3) IISS, *Military Balance, 1978-79*, p. 68.

(4) Cho, Soon Sung, "Korea in the Changing Pattern of East Asian International Relations in the 1990s", unpublished manuscript draft, 1979.

(5) Prof. Robert A. Scalapino's statement before the Sub-Committee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, May 4, 1972. cf. Harrison, Selig S., "One Korea?", *Foreign Policy*, Winter, 1974/75, p. 42.

North Korea's major strategy, today, has shifted to force the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea and then to disrupt the internal stability of South Korea. Once American forces are withdrawn from South Korea and the present military balance is shifted in favor of North Korea there would be a great danger of another Korean war.

The North Korean economy began to encounter serious problems and bottlenecks in the early 1970s, and the edge it once enjoyed vis-a-vis the South evaporated altogether. According to a 1978 study by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency:

Over the past decade the export-oriented South Korean economy has clearly outpaced the less dynamic North Korean economy in raising labor productivity, absorbing modern technology, and building up in international financial strength. While North Korea's real GNP was doubling between 1965 and 1976, real GNP more than tripled. As a result, South Korea recently surpassed the North in per capita GNP, an advantage Pyongyang held since partition in 1945. More importantly, the economic gap in South Korea's favor will widen substantially over the next five years.⁽⁶⁾

The most notable outward symptom as well as source of North Korea's economic problems is its inability to repay trade debts, estimated to be about \$1.4 billion owed to Western European nations and Japan plus about \$1 billion owed to Communist nations. Therefore, recently North Korea's trade mission visited Japan for the re-negotiation of repayment of trade debt of 800 million yen (about \$400 million).⁽⁷⁾

The military situation, however, is somewhat different. As noted, a major source of North Korea's economic problems has been its heavy

defense burden, which means that, to a certain extent, North Korea's economic performance has been inversely related to its military build-up. The U.S. intelligence community has revealed that North Korea has a formidable military arsenal both in absolute and relative terms. Most importantly, it has acquired the capability to produce most of its weapons, including submarines and sophisticated tanks. Currently, North Korea appears to enjoy a slight edge in military hardware vis-a-vis the South. (see appendices)

To maintain a huge military force in the absence of war for a long period of time presents serious problems to the Communist political system itself. In such a situation the only way to maintain their tightly regimented system is to heighten tensions. North Korea's repeated demand for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea has served such internal political purposes.

On the South Korean side, for more than two decades the U.N. forces or American troops in Korea have been an essential instrument for the preservation of national security. They have helped maintain an overall military balance between the South and North, thereby providing an effective deterrent against North Korea's aggression. The U.S. military posture has also allowed the major powers to pursue detente policies in Northeast Asia.

For these reasons, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea would cause, in the absence of new agreements providing otherwise, a military imbalance and consequently a spiral escalation in the arms race between the South and North.

Unfortunately, in light of recent perceptions of wavering American commitment, the Seoul

(6) U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, *Korea: The Economic Race Between the North and the South*, Washington, 1978, p. 1.

(7) *Asahi, Shinbun*, Tokyo, Japan, July 25, 1979 (editorial).

government has come to believe that the build-up of a self-reliant defense capability is necessary. South Korea's National Assembly enacted the national defense tax in 1975 to enable the completion of the planned modernization of its armed forces because the modernization program designed to be finished by 1980 with grants and loans from the U.S. was slow to get under way. Following President Carter's decision to withdraw the American forces from South Korea, ROK defense expenditures increased enormously. In FY 1978, \$2.5 billion was budgeted for defense, 5.6% of the GNP--an increase of 254% over FY 1975. ⁽⁸⁾

At present, the self-reliant defense posture of the South seems to be faced with two fundamental issues:

- 1) how to cope with the North Korean threat and nuclear blackmail by the Soviet Union and China without direct support from the U.S.
- 2) how to insure a favorable international environment which will enable the South Korean people to deal with their national problems. ⁽⁹⁾

III. Political Considerations

The attention of those interested in maintaining peace and stability in Korea has tended to focus on issues related to the stability of the North-South military balance: the build-up of North Korean armed forces, the planned withdrawal of U.S. ground combat forces, the credibility of the U.S. commitment to the

security of the Republic of Korea, and the practicability of the forward defense plan. Although there can be no question either that these issues are of the utmost importance or that a stable military balance is essential to the maintenance of the credible deterrent that must exist if the threat of war is to be kept at an acceptably low level, the very fact that these military issues exist and are so important is itself an expression of a still more basic reality: that the root cause of the tension and conflict that have racked the Korean peninsula since the end of the Second World War is the existence of a number of fundamental unresolved political issues. ⁽¹⁰⁾

While there seems to be a general agreement in the South that in its dealings with North Korea the ROK should do its best to promote its own security, legitimacy, and stability, this consensus is not as solid as it might appear in some areas.

However, the government and people of South Korea are clearly united in placing a very high premium on security, and in all likelihood view it as the most important determinant of future South-North relations. They are willing to go to considerable lengths to muster the domestic and foreign military resources that they believe are necessary to maintain their security. To the extent that are successful in this endeavor, the deterrent to North Korean aggression will remain effective and they will be able to avoid war.

Even if the deterrent fails and the North

(8) Lee, Chae-Jin, "South Korea's Foreign Policy" in *Korea Studies*, Vol. 2, Center for Korean Studies, Univ. of Hawaii, 1978, p.102.

Korea Herald, September 16, 1977.

Donga Ilbo, September 17, 1977.

(9) White Nathan, "The Necessity for a German Solution to the Korean Problem," *Korea & World Affairs*, Research Center for Peace and Unification, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Fall 1978), p. 359.

(10) *Ibid.*, pp. 349-350.

miscalculates and advances across the DMZ, it should be possible to turn back the attack and preserve the integrity of the South and its way of life.

The government in the South in its approaches to the North favors a gradualist approach, which it holds to be true to the realities of the present situation and to represent the only way to achieve a comprehensive, non-violent settlement on the peninsula. This policy calls for normalization of relations with North Korea, following which cross-recognition by the four great powers would be sought.

North Korea's policy requirements emphasize the creation of a military balance favorable to the North. This calls for continued efforts to strengthen the North's armed forces, both by further building up the domestic defense industry and by persuading China and the Soviet Union to increase their military assistance. It also calls for efforts to deny South Korea the military resources available or potentially available to it from its ally, first by encouraging the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea, later by creating a climate in which U.S. forces would not be re-introduced when the attack began, and finally by securing the abrogation of the U.S.-R.O.K. Mutual Defense Treaty.⁽¹¹⁾ Because North Korea is not prepared to concede South Korea's right to exist, Pyongyang remains eager to isolate South Korea in the world community.

Additionally, it seems clear that there is a basic difference between the two Koreas with regard to ultimate unification. South Korea contends that reunification of Korea can only be achieved by a gradual step-by-step process. Since there are substantial differences in terms

of political ideology, and the operation of the economic systems, South Korea argues, it would take some time to bridge and accommodate the differences between the two systems. Thus the first order of business is to establish a mutual sense of security guaranteed by both Koreas, as well as the U.S., the Soviet Union, China, and Japan. Particularly since the agony of the Korean War has not yet been completely effaced, a "non-aggression Pact" between South and North Korea must be effected before any serious negotiations for peaceful unification can be contemplated. Therefore, the peaceful co-existence of the two Koreas must be recognized as a necessary transient stage. North Korea, to the contrary, takes a "once and for all" approach to the unification question. It argues that the so-called "cross recognition" of each Korea's present separate identity will perpetuate a permanent division of Korea. Thus, North Korea demands an immediate holding of political negotiations to hasten reunification as much as possible.

North Korea has never abandoned its policy of unification through the use of force and has launched an arms race even after accepting the opportunity for dialogue with Seoul. For example, North Korean Foreign Minister Ho Tahm proposed on April 12, 1971 a 100,000 man reduction of armed forces, but in the following years the size of the armed forces has steadily grown, from an estimated 402,500 in 1972 to 467,000 in 1974 to 495,000 in 1976 to over 700,000 in 1979.⁽¹²⁾ Another example which might be cited are the three large invasion tunnels dug by the North under the DMZ which have been discovered since 1974.⁽¹³⁾

(11) *Ibid.*, pp. 360-361.

(12) *Korea Times*, Seoul, July 22, 1979, p. 1.

(13) Korean Overseas Information Service, *Secret Tunnel Under Panmunjom*, Seoul, 1978, p. 3.

IV. Current Trends

This year has seen several promising chances for constructive dialogue come to nothing. Beginning with the Pyongyang's acceptance of Seoul's offer to participate in negotiations with the North "without preconditions" a series of meetings was launched which ended in a deadlock as to the proper forum for the negotiations: the South favors negotiations between high level officials of both governments while the North favors discussions between non-governmental groups. Seoul's participation in an international ping-pong competition likewise became an issue of dispute between the two Koreas and talks aimed at resolving the question ended in a stalemate and visas for the South's players were withheld.⁽¹⁴⁾

During U.S. president Carter's visit to Seoul in late June (1979) three-way talks involving North Korea, South Korea and the U.S. were formally proposed in an attempt to reopen negotiations. This proposal was rejected by the North ten days later. The statement by Pyongyang maintained that the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Korea and the replacement of the Korea armistice agreement by a peace accord should be discussed exclusively by North Korea and the United States, the two signatories to the armistice.⁽¹⁵⁾ In strong language, the statement denounced the recent visit to Korea by the U.S. President as a "hypocritical mission aimed at inciting invasion and war." As in the past, Pyongyang reiterated its desire

for direct talks with the U.S. claiming that the South is not qualified to participate, by virtue of its refusal to sign the original armistice.

China, as well, expressed strong displeasure at continued American support for South Korea in an official message to North Korea published on July 10 (1979) by the New China News Agency following Carter's visit to Seoul.⁽¹⁶⁾

North Korea's "total" rejection of the holding of three-way talks implies that it once again has taken a hard-line policy in executing its foreign policy programs, rather than the "somewhat" flexible attitude shown recently. Thus, North Korea called for a total separation of two-way talks between the United States and North Korea aimed at discussing matters related to the withdrawal of the American forces from Korea and conclusion of a peace agreement, from South-North Korean talks aimed at discussing the Korean unification problem.⁽¹⁷⁾ According to Pyongyang "there are no legal or logical grounds for South Korea to intervene in the U.S.-North Korea meeting."⁽¹⁸⁾

On July 21, 1979, the U.S. president Carter announced the suspension of the U.S. ground troops withdrawal from Korea. According to a senior official at the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs the suspension should be interpreted as an "indefinite" freeze or a "virtual nullification" of the original plan.⁽¹⁹⁾

Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security advisor to president Carter gave three major reasons for Carter's decision in favor of the suspension:

(14) Overholt, William H. (ed.), *Global Political Assessment*, No. 7, Research Institute on International Change, Columbia University, New York, October 1978-April 1979, p. 42.

(15) *Korea Herald*, July 11, 1979, p. 1.

(16) Peking (AFP), July 11, 1979.

(17) *Korea Herald*, July 11, 1979, p. 1.

(18) *Ibid.*

(19) *Korean Herald*, July 22, 1979, p. 1.

- 1) The size of North Korea's ground forces, armor, fire power and mobility is larger than previously estimated;
- 2) Despite joint diplomatic efforts by President Park Chung Hee and president Carter, there has been no progress in reducing tensions on the Korean peninsula;
- 3) The Soviet Union has steadily increased its military power in East Asia and the eruption of renewed conflict and new uncertainties in Southeast Asia are witness.⁽²⁰⁾

Among these reasons, the third point is the most persuasive in view of U.S. global military and political strategies.

The continued stationing of sizable American forces including ground troops in Korea has manifold purposes to serve in addition to the security on the Korean peninsula. It contributes to the general stability and peace in the entire region of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. Strategically, the security in the Western Pacific is vital to the security interests of the United States.

The current troop strength of North Korea is now estimate at around 7700,000 in 41 divisions. Its artillery power and mobility have drastically improved and special commando units for guerrilla warfare have been vastly reinforced.⁽²¹⁾

At present the ROK produces a variety of weapons including tanks, but by the early 1980s it will acquire the capacity to produce most of the weaponry needed in Korea. Korea being the pivotal point in the East Asian peace system, the ROK's self-reliant defense capability will contribute to local and regional stability.

it was perhaps with the idea of regional

stability in mind that prompted the Japanese State Minister for Defense. Gami Yamashita, to recently say that, "I was deeply impressed by the earnest effort the ROK has been making in defense of its own country" after a visit to the DMZ.⁽²²⁾ Yamashita also recognized the threat the North poses the South.⁽²³⁾

V. Planning for Peace

The stability of Northeast Asia is focused on the Korean peninsula, which includes North-South Korea, Japan, China, the Soviet Union and the U.S.A. The population of these six countries is about 40% of the world's population and their combined military expenditure is over 60% of the world's total,

The three great nuclear powers--the U.S., the Soviet Union and China are crossed in Northeast Asia, and the Korean peninsula is one of the most heavily equipped military areas in the world. Therefore, it is exceedingly difficult indeed to regulate arms control and disarmament problems.

The political dimension of arms supplies is also well-illustrated by the two Korean nations: South Korea relies on the U.S.A. for 99 per cent of its major arms imports--a trend which is not likely to be reversed easily, as South Korea is investing more heavily in local arms production capacity with U.S. aid--and North Korea relies on the Soviet Union for 91 per cent of its major arms imports, the remainder being covered by China. North Korea is also putting much effort into achieving a local production capacity exclusively under Soviet licenses.⁽²⁴⁾

(20) *Korea Times*, Seoul, July 21, 1979, p.1.

(21) *Korea Herald*, July 22, 1979, p.2 (editorial).

(22) Tokyo (AFP), *Korea Herald*, July 28, 1979.

(23) *Asahi Shinbun*, Tokyo, July 27, 1979.

(24) SIPRI, *World Armaments and Disarmament, SIPRI Yearbook, 1978*, Stockholm, p.235.

Therefore, limitation of the arms race and reduction of armed forces and arms control on the Korean peninsula is only capable of being effected by the influence of the Soviet Union, China and the U.S. upon the two Koreas.

Peaceful unification and restoration of nationhood in Korea is possible when the people and their leaders understand these principles of international politics, and move constructively toward unification on political, economic and psychological levels. At least, there should be a minimum agreement on peaceful unification on a political level, some sort of economic agreement of mutual gain, and increased communications and transactions including limited main services between the two sectors. Only such positive action by the leaders of both sides, in view of the presence of a sense of nationhood among the people, will advance the unification movement.⁽²⁵⁾

An interesting and concrete proposal for resolving the Korean dilemma has been put forward by Prof. Hisashi Maeda. It involves, significantly, the establishment of a buffer zone created by expanding the present DMZ, an idea which holds great promise in furthering peace and stability on the peninsula. Prof. Maeda further suggests the following:

- 1) people [as opposed to the governments] would be the initiators and prime actors;
- 2) The goal would be peaceful unification, neutralization and independence. The reality of division would be recognized by each other for a time;
- 3) The U.S., Japan, Soviet Union and China should cooperate with each other for peace and stability on the Korean peninsula.

According to these principles:

- 1) North-South Korea should be agreed upon as an area of peace by treaty;
- 2) The U.S., Soviet Union, China and Japan would be ratifiers of the protocol of this agreement;
- 3) The U.N. should be responsible for making the necessary arrangements for this treaty.

Thereafter, North-South Korea should gradually reduce its military forces and act so as to bring about trust in each other. Additionally, the four powers should agree that they would not bring any military equipment or armed forces onto the Korean peninsula. There is also a need for an effective observation system and control on the part of the six countries concerned.⁽²⁶⁾

It is useful to emphasize here, as Prof. Zagoria does, that the only way of genuinely testing North Korea's sincerity in the peace proceedings would be to insist that the American troops remain in the South until a peaceful settlement ratified by all the concerned great powers has been ratified.⁽²⁷⁾

Those interested in promoting peace and security on the Korean peninsula and by extension in Northeast Asia--should adopt as their principal policy objective the consolidation and legitimation of the existing division of the peninsula. There is no choice but to pursue what has been termed the "German solution" to the Korean problem. That is, to work toward mutual acceptance and recognition by the Koreans and the normalization of relations between each of them and all four of the interested outside powers.

(25) Sunoo, Harold Hakwon, *America's Dilemma in Asia: The Case of South Korea*, Nelson Hall, Chicago, 1979, p. 176.

(26) Maeda, Hisashi, *Asahi Shinbun*, April 12, 1979.

(27) Zagoria, Donald S., "Into the Breach: New Soviet Alliances in the Third World", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 57, No. 4, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, Spring 1979, p. 747.

Para-military forces	1,500,000	1,450,000	1,260,000
Estimated GNP	\$2.8 billion (1971-72)	\$3.5 billion	\$3.5 billion
Defense Budget	\$443 million	\$620 million	\$570 million
South Korea			
Population	32,000,000	32,665,000	33,740,000
Total armed forces	634,750	633,500	625,000
Army	560,000	560,000	560,000
Army Reserves	—	1,000,000	1,000,000
Navy	16,750	18,900	20,000
Navy Reserves	—	30,000	33,000
Marine	33,000	29,600	20,000
Marine Reserves	—	60,000	60,000
Air Force	25,000	25,000	25,000
Air Force Reserves	—	35,000	35,000
Para-military forces	2,000,000	2,000,000	2,000,000
Estimated GNP	\$8.1 billion(1971)	\$9.3 billion	\$12.6 billion
Defense Budget	\$427 million	\$476 million	\$558 million

Military Balance: North-South Korea, 1976-79

Country	1975—76	1976—77	1977—78	1978—79
North Korea				
Population	15,940,000	16,280,000	16,720,000	17,170,000
Total Armed Forces	467,000	495,000	500,000	512,000
Army	410,000	430,000	430,000	440,000*
Army Reserves	250,000	—	—	—
Navy	17,000	20,000	25,000	27,000
Navy Reserves	—	—	—	—
Airforce	40,000	45,000	45,000	45,000
Airforce Reserves	40,000	—	—	—
Security Forces	50,000	40,000	40,000	40,000
Para-military Forces	1,500,000	1,800,000	2,000,000	2,000,000
Estimated GNP	\$3.5 billion	\$3.5 billion	\$8.9 billion	\$9.8 billion
Defense Budget	\$770 million	\$878 million	\$1 billion	\$1.3 billion
South Korea				
Population	34,410,000	34,610,000	35,200,000	35,940,000
Total Armed forces	625,000	595,000	635,000	642,000
Army	560,000	520,000	560,000	560,000
Army Reserves	1,000,000	1,000,000	1,100,000	1,100,000
Navy	20,000	25,000	25,000	32,000
Navy Reserves	33,000	33,000	25,000	25,000
Marine	20,000	20,000	20,000	20,000
Marine Reserves	60,000	60,000	60,000	60,000
Air Force	25,000	30,000	30,000	30,000

Air Force Reserves	35,000	55,000	55,000	55,000
Para-military forces	2,000,000	750,000	1,000,000	1,000,000
Estimated GNP	\$ 17.5 billion	\$ 18.4 billion	\$ 18.4 billion (1975)	\$ 31.5 billion (1977)
Defense Budget	\$ 719 million	\$ 1.5 billion	\$ 1.8 billion	\$ 2.6 billion

Source: IISS, *The Military Balance, 1972-79*,

* U.S. military intelligence reports place the number of North Korean ground troops at over 700,000. IISS, *Military Balance, 1979-80*, p. 68. *Asian Security 1979*, Research Institute for Peace and Security, Tokyo, Japan, 1979, pp. 214-215.