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North Korea Pursuing the Hermit Tradition

Reflections on the questions of Reunification, the Nuclear Issue and the Role of China

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NORTH KOREAN CHARACTERISTICS

Already in the times of the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, usually called North Korea, was regarded as eccentric also by fellow communists. After the fall of communism North Korea, virtually alone, proceeded along its established path in external as well as internal affairs as if nothing had changed. In real life, however, the country's economy deteriorated to the extent of famine and the population for its survival becoming dependent on food gifts from the detested capitalist world, especially the arch enemies USA, Japan and South Korea. Apparently nothing could induce the North Korean leadership even to contemplate a change of policies.

As an example of the negative attitudes to any reconsideration it should be mentioned that the head of state Kim Il Sung after his death in 1994 was confirmed as president for eternity and accordingly no successor being formally appointed. As a consequence the problem consists of trying to explore the reasons that can throw light on the options available to the North Koreans regarding the political course to choose.

To this end I shall draw the attention to the three pillars on which North Korea has been established, namely isolation, the Confucian tradition and marxism-leninism.

ISOLATION

It is well known how Japan for several centuries isolated itself from foreign influences and only permitted a Dutch trading station to settle on an island outside the Japanese coast, and furthermore how Japan in the 1850s was opened to foreign contacts by the force of the US Navy. Also the Kingdom of Korea, in practice a Chinese vassal state, had chosen a similar isolation to an extent that ship-wrecks were taken prisoner and handed over to Chinese authorities. The USA failed in 1866 in their attempt to open Korea in the same manner as it had opened Japan. In 1876 the Japanese managed to do it and in the following decades Korea was forced to enter into contacts with foreigners, especially the great powers. But Japan aimed at dominating the entire peninsula and in the beginning of the 20th century managed to make Korea a Japanese colony. Korea was again cut off from the outside world and remained isolated until the end of the 2nd World War.

After the war the USA and the Soviet Union decided to divide Korea along the 38th parallel in two occupation zones in a way reminding of the division of Germany. The United Nations prescribed general elections to be held in 1948 but it was prevented by the communist regime installed by the Soviet Union in the Northern part. In the same year the two Korean states were proclaimed. In 1950 the North tried to conquer the South, which led to the Korean war that lasted for three years and inflicted a horrible devastation of the whole peninsula. The armistice agreement of 1953 established a frontier roughly corresponding to the abovementioned 38th parallel. While the Germans could cross their internal borderline for a

number of years the domestic Korean frontier was hermetically closed. Only after the famines in the North during the 1990s some temporal openings have been permitted.

After the Korean war South Korea was integrated into the market economy orbit and developed to become one of the East Asian ‘tiger economies’ and later also a democracy. It is in this context, however, important to note that North Korea continued to be characterized by the traditional isolation albeit within the communist orbit. The growing antagonism between Beijing and Moscow during the 1950s rendered it possible for the North Korean government to loosen the bonds imposed by these two communist superpowers and to follow a more independent course, characterized by an enforced industrialization. As a consequence the isolation also towards the communist world was accentuated. It shall be underlined that the industrialization was realized at an astonishing pace and in the 1970s North Korea appeared as a success story within the COMECON sphere comparable to South Korea in the OECD fold. But the price was a severe isolation. The average North Korean had no realistic idea about the world around him – he was only taught to loathe US imperialism, Japan and the stooges in South Korea and to despise the cowardly politics of other communist states in seeking a peaceful cohabitation with the capitalist world. Ideological antagonisms also limited contacts with other socialist countries as North Korea’s socialist revolution was proclaimed as aiming not at abolishing not capitalism but feudalism, a political theory totally incompatible with Moscow’s interpretation of the meaning of scientific socialism.

THE EAST ASIAN TRADITION

The importance of the local tradition – *Confucianism* – for attitudes and the way of thinking cannot be overestimated. The North Koreans believe that they have created a communist society with a people thinking in communist ways. But because of the isolation inherited concepts and ideas have remained self evident to such a degree that it makes it impossible for them to realize that their own ways are incompatible with Marxism-leninism – Confucianism dominates the subconscious mind while communism only operates in their conscious brain representing what they have been taught by political indoctrination.

In the 6th century B.C. Kong Futsu (Confucius) introduced a state philosophy, aiming at creating harmonious society by good government, which will be the result of a nation being governed by morally advanced individuals. From this point of view Confucianism is elitist and hierarchical. But at the same time equality is underlined by demanding that every man be given the opportunity to achieve moral advance and, as a consequence, a leading position in society. Thus, the aim of education did not consist of promoting professional skills but of training ethically advanced government officials. This was arrived at by studying the classical scripts, especially the works of Confucius. As a consequence the governing political system is regarded as a reflection of the prevailing moral order – of the Will of Heaven. Under such circumstances it is impossible to distinguish between politics and morals, making diverging political views immoral. Government thus possesses a moral monopoly, expressing itself as power monopoly and unavoidably leading to intolerance.

Nevertheless violent transfers of power took place, for instance changes of dynasties in China. Such changes are to be interpreted as the power of the ruler being founded on the Will of Heaven. When the moral example of the ruler withered away rebellious movements arose and the one who gained the upper hand demonstrated by his victory that he had become the new holder of the Mandate of Heaven. And it is out of question for ordinary people to contest such a verdict.

For the North Korean commoner Kim Il Sung accordingly carried the Mandate of Heaven, the moral monopoly and absolute power. Thereby the regime in South Korea by definition becomes immoral, which spills over to states supporting Seoul, especially the USA. The rest of us who recognized both Koreas were excused for not having understood the true character of the problem and were expected to learn that from them and turn into uncompromising supporters of North Korea. All attempts to mediate between North and South were, of course, categorically dismissed. (The Australian foreign minister tried – whereupon his embassy was ordered to close and the staff expelled.)

MARXISM-LENINISM

This ideology claimed to be a scientific socialism, meaning that it made clear how society's development to socialism took place according to scientific laws. As a consequence the North Koreans, already possessing the inherited monopoly on morals, became convinced of also having acquired the scientific keys to the doors of future. This conviction made – and makes – them immune to all opinions differing from theirs. To negotiate with them consisted of listening – to argue in a discussion was meaningless as they consistently disregarded one's arguments. A Swedish mechanic working on the construction site of the Pyongyang underground gave an illustration from his own experience. He used a 12 horse-power air compressor and accordingly it could supply energy for three 4-horse-power drills or four 3-horse-power ones. But his North Korean comrades insisted, with reference to the thoughts of their Great Leader, that they should yield better results by connecting four 4-horse-power drills. The Swede tried in vain to explain why this could not be done. It was to no avail and the North Koreans had to try and discover by themselves that it wasn't feasible.

The Marxist criticism of capitalism was founded on the allegedly scientific law that only manpower creates value and that accordingly the employers impoverish the workers by keeping for themselves a part of the value that is produced. To make a long and complicated – and erroneous – story short, this is done by extorting interest on the capital used for purchasing i.a. machinery. This leads to calculations of profitableness becoming prohibited for ideological reasons. It also becomes difficult to calculate the value and costs of natural resources, transport costs, maintenance and damages to the environment. As a consequence efficient methods for the comparison of costs are lacking when taking decisions on investments. This leads to waste of resources. This was noticeable when North Korea in the beginning of the 1970s realized that the best capital goods were not offered by the socialist states but could be obtained in the West. They suddenly placed orders for billions for the purchase of modern machinery, for the use of which they would have needed time to adapt their infrastructure, i.a. by increasing the supply of electricity. This was not done and the expected production of goods was delayed and they could not pay their bills in time. Delayed payments meant credit restrictions leading to inhibited imports of complementary equipment and spare parts. The factories stopped while the debts grew with compound interest. To a devastating degree the country's resources were wasted on investments yielding no economic growth. North Korea was hit by stagnation and decline.

Also agricultural production was hurt by ideological constraints. Like industry it had first grown at a good pace followed by stagnation. The draughts and inundations of the 1990s resulted in failure of crops and crises in the supply of food. The extent to which the North Koreans had become prisoners of their own ideology of self sufficiency was then demonstrated – they remained convinced of the correctness of their politics and refused to reconsider them. Simultaneously the assistance from the communist states ceased because of the implosion of the Soviet Union and finally also China found it meaningless to deliver

goods at no price to the bankrupt North Korean estate. In this way bad weather, lack of energy and a false ideology cooperated in producing the crisis that still lasts. North Korea was been forced to turn to its arch enemies with pleas for food gifts, but nevertheless it makes no signs of contemplating a change of its economic policy.

THE PRESENT SETTING

North Korea's negotiation position is extremely poor but the reluctance of the rest of the world to pay for the reconstruction of the bankrupt state soon proved to be a trump card. The DPRK had always believed itself to be the coveted prey of great powers but had, in the moment of its most dire distress, to realize that none of these powers was interested in conquering the country. Pyongyang has, since its creation, consistently demonstrated that its only tactics of negotiation consists of threats. This is, however, a poor argument when begging for food but reappraisal has never been a North Korean virtue and it has developed a formidable skill in obtaining food and energy by endless threats. Their adversaries at the other side of the table have no better argument than expressions of bad temper as they cannot abandon the poor masses enclosed inside the hostile Democratic Peoples Republic to die from starvation. Accordingly the present negotiations and the discussion on the North Korean case is bewildering and contains all sorts of proposals from leniency to preventive war.

The region is well aware of and has strong ties to its history and traditions. The relationship between China, Korea and Japan was for most part of the last millennium certainly not without problems but on the whole rather stable and foreseeable. The ongoing negotiations with North Korea are characterized by being both indispensable and a waste of time, as they are repetitive, trying in the extreme and inconclusive. Political conditions in this very remote part of the world have during the last half-century shaped such a peculiar situation that it has to be steered back to historic normality adapted to the modern world, an undertaking craving much patience. Pyongyang is, however, negotiating for its survival and it shall be repeated that it believes its only recourse to be perpetual threats.

The 'Korean problem' essentially contains two issues, reunification and nuclear armament. The treatment of these two items shall here, in principle, mainly be regarded as depending on the crucial role played by China.

THE INFLUENCE OF CHANGING PARAMETERS FROM THE CONTROL OF TERRITORY TO CONTROL OF ECONOMY

Generally speaking, history and foreign policy has traditionally been dominated by *the control of territory*. History is the tale of conquests and domination resulting in balances of power, which from time to time have been upset and had to be reestablished. Economic assets were of course always an attractive booty – but by no means of exclusive importance. Since the times of Babylon we can observe how the quest for domination, even world domination, led a life of its own. Alexander the Great did not fight in order to become rich, Rome and Caesar did not conquer England because of its riches, neither did China reconquer Tibet for that reason. The Scramble for Africa consisted as much of preventing others from grabbing territory as to use it for one's own purposes. Greed certainly contributed to the lust for conquest but creating and upholding an empire apparently constitutes an irresistible temptation in itself.

But the 20th century, and especially its second half, saw a change of parameters. It was gradually realized that control of economy from most points of view was more advantageous than control of territory. The dissolution of the colonial empires is a case in point. Building

welfare societies would for financial reasons be indefinitely procrastinated if its blessings also should comprise all peoples in the colonies. Even the Soviet Union recognized realities in so far as calling the USA neo-colonialist, meaning that it without possessing any colonies was the foremost colonial power by means of its economic domination.. This method is also after all more humane as it is less blood-thirsty and in the long term it may contribute to the weaker parties' economic progress. This view is illustrated by the developments after the 2nd world war. Formerly a victor had usually destroyed the crops of the vanquished and in some cases extorted compensation. After 1945 he had to reconstruct the factories he had bombed into ruins and ashes in order to arrive at a new international stability. The Marshall program illustrated the mutual benefit of the re-establishment of European prosperity. Moscow remained with the traditional policy of territorial domination over its neighbors which by no means excluded economic exploitation. Russia followed the old policy and lagged behind.

Japan constitutes another illustrative example. The modernization of Japan was the success story one hundred years ago, leading it to hold the paramount position in its region. It emulated all other colonial powers in expansion and conquest of territories, leading to the catastrophe of 1945. Japan then realized that economic progress was a both much cheaper and more successful way of gaining prosperity and international influence. (One may also venture the explanation that, according to East Asian concepts, the Mandate of Heaven was no longer vested in control of territory but of economy, making the people unreflectingly and unanimously supporting this expression of metaphysical guidelines.)

China was traditionally the dominating power in the region, putting an indelible civilizational imprint on Japan, Vietnam and above all Korea. Until the late 19th century Korea had for some 500 years been a vassal state of China. For the government in Beijing this was held to be the normal state of affairs and in 1895 Imperial China went to war with Japan over the control of the northern parts of the peninsula. Japan won and occupied all Korea, later advancing into Manchuria and China proper. After the defeat of 1945 Korea regained its independence but was divided into the communist-dominated North and the West-oriented South. In China the communists established a People's Republic only in 1949. Accordingly China and North Korea from then onwards both belonged to the so called Eastern, communist bloc. North Korea's attempt at conquering South Korea with force failed and it was saved from being itself conquered by the US-led UN-coalition by Communist China's intervention with armed forces in 1950 which re-established the frontier at the 38th parallel. It should be observed that China thus twice has gone to war over the control over the territory of Northern Korea – nothing similar was ever undertaken against other foreign powers' occupation of China's own territory, e.g. Hongkong and Macao which were recovered as late as 1997. There is no reason to believe that China ever has ceased to regard Korea as belonging to its sphere of interest. In 1945, at the division of Korea, China's hands were tied by civil war and there existed no capacity to intervene. But the longevity of Chinese visions and the quality of their patience to wait for the proper moment shall never be underestimated.

However we shall not forget the changing parameters of steering politics from control of territory to economic domination. This phenomenon was more or less reserved for market economy countries. The Soviet Union showed no inclination in this direction and, as a consequence, suffered from implosion. In order to gain power Jeltzin as President of the Russian Republic made the smart move of announcing its withdrawal from the Soviet Union, thereby undermining the position of his rival, Union President Gorbajov. Lacking the coercive force of Russia both the Union and the Warsaw Pact fell asunder. In order to regain its influence the emerging Russia will in the future find itself more restricted to economic

means that inspire to voluntary cooperation, This, in turn, demands the growth of a strong market economy and before that has happened, it is to be feared that Moscow retains the preference for territorial domination and continues resorting to violence, as has been the case e.g. in Chechnya.

China's economy appears, in comparison to Russia, to be more balanced. It also seems to reflect a more conscious market orientation, which ultimately ought to lead to a gradual reappraisal of China's old propensity for territorial control. Given China's habits of long term tactics it will take its time. It is debatable if the wretched state of North Korea's economy plays any role for China. For both North and South Koreans reunification is a categorical imperative but the South Koreans are obviously scared by the economic aspects of it being enforced prematurely, as it would endanger their own economic, political and democratic development. For China, however, North Korea is just, so to speak, a peanut – its total population roughly corresponding to the yearly increase of that of China. North Korea's poverty and the reluctant attitude of all others to take any responsibility for its progress probably reassures Beijing of meeting – in the long run – no problems with remaining in undisputed possession of its historical sphere of interest. For the time being Beijing can continue concentrating its efforts on cultivating the economic ties with the southern half of the former vassal peninsula.

Summing up, what are the medium to long term goals of the all participants but the DPRK in the six-party-negotiations? Presumably an economically strong Republic of Korea remaining market-oriented. It is often said that China and Japan are not welcoming the emergence of an economically strong South Korea. This line of thought, however, belongs to old-fashioned school of territorial control. As has been amply illustrated by the recent history of Western Europe, all trading nations profit from a fairly even distribution of wealth. The poor North Korea constitutes a both dispensable and more unruly neighbour than the rich South Korea.

CHINA'S KEY ROLE

Given the surrealistic and anomalous character of North Korea in all respects – its self-asserting ideology and style of government, its inconsiderable size and constantly bankrupt economy, its isolated location far away on the globe with virtually only 1½ neighboring states (China and the other Korea, Russia and Japan rather being 'interested bystanders') – one must admire its achievement in having been considered for more than half a century the perhaps most important threat to world peace. Admittedly, it could play the role of a useful maverick as long as the conditions of the Cold War prevailed. In the more peaceful new world, however, the protracted negotiations serve to make us understand that the play is not over yet and that its director in Pyongyang as long as possible will add more sentences for the actors to proclaim. In clear terms: in all likelihood China finds a re-establishment of the pre-1895 situation of Korea natural but may for the time being acquiesce in Northern Korea being recognized as belonging to the Chinese orbit. As hinted at above China may slowly be approaching the modern concept of economic influence but for the time being we have to be content with this attitude hopefully embracing only South Korea.

At this juncture it is necessary to contemplate the old relationships of the region and their Confucian imprints. China remains the venerated alderman and Japan represents the successful upstart who is strong and rich enough to, albeit reluctantly, be granted respect. But Korea has always been treated as the last in the regional pecking order. After the division of the peninsula, North Korea for some twenty years managed to outshine South Korea because of its undeniable industrial performances. Its self-confidence was reflected in the conceited

cult of the leader whose Juche ideology was propagated as the gospel for all developing nations. The turning point came in the 1970s when the situation changed and South Korea's economic and political success led to international recognition and respect. Nowadays South Korea is taking over the role of the region's successful upstart but its respect suffers locally from being related to a North Korea, lagging behind to an extent that now singles it out as being last in the pecking order, not only regionally but on a world wide scale. Pyongyang's rebellious attitudes reflect the ensuing inevitable inferiority complex. This aspect should not be neglected when dealing with North Korea. Nations react as men and when finding themselves isolated in a corner hit out right and left and are generally seen as behaving erratically – although all experience shows that it is a quite common and foreseeable reaction.

The conclusions to be drawn from the reasoning above indicate that North Korean politics are determined by a violent nationalism and that China constitutes the only support against the outside world, which must be considered as showing an unanimously antagonistic attitude. Without doubt the regime in Pyongyang is now fighting for its survival. All odds are against it with exception for the Chinese factor. When the communist world imploded around 1990 and North Korea was afflicted by floods, drought, famine and virtual collapse of the economy, their leaders must have feared for the future of their rule. Everything indicated that the Mandate of Heaven no longer was vested in the rulers of Pyongyang. But in this respect nothing happened. Nobody tried to topple the regime and friend and foe alike came to the assistance of the starving population. The whole situation must have been totally incomprehensible for the Northerners. Not only had their system and philosophy, which they took for granted as being the most advanced on earth, failed but also world-communism was quickly disappearing. Nevertheless their worst adversaries organized the deliveries and distribution of food and health care, perhaps not according to Pyongyang's priorities but all the same in a way that saved the regime from collapsing. North Koreans have never been admired for their concept of reality and it remains doubtful if they have ever realized that nobody wanted to take charge of their bankrupt estate. Anyway, the desperate rulers saw a flickering light of hope of, at least temporary, survival. Of course they try to stay alive and they are recklessly exploiting the soft spots of their adversaries. And it shall not be excluded that they retain a hidden conviction that the ultimate victory will be theirs.

Developments have turned out to support the North Korean aspirations and survival has become a realistic option. This may be demonstrated by the following list of conditions and circumstances, which indicate that no reunification will take place in the foreseeable future.

a) Against the background of Korea having traditionally been a vassal state of China Korean nationalism was cultivated in order to survive (n.b. details like inventing a Korean alphabet in the 15th century; keeping different clothing and furniture than the Chinese etc). The Japanese occupation made Korean nationalism grow stronger. South Korea was able to avoid renewed Chinese dependence because of the conditions of the Cold War. North Korea diligently managed to use the Sino-Soviet controversy to increase its freedom of maneuver. North Korean nationalism is rampant – but not even Juche makes it possible to stand alone against the whole world. In the post 1990-conditions China remains the only reliable supporter of North Korean autonomy. The North Koreans have no other ally and China has the patience to promote its long term goals, here interpreted as being the reestablishment of the pre-1875 political influence;

b) Accordingly, China cannot be expected to tolerate a Korean reunification implying that Northern Korea escapes from belonging to China's acknowledged sphere of interest; in a very long term perspective and under the condition of China changing from adhering to the control

of territory to the control of economy, it should, however, not be excluded that China might adapt more tolerant attitudes – an option that shall not be dealt with in this short term context;

- c) North Korea is not prepared to abandon its economic system and give up self-rule;
- d) South Korea is not prepared to cover the expenses and run other risks connected with a reunification according to market economy conditions;
- e) Nor are the other influential regional powers, Japan and the predominant USA ready to envisage a development implying that South Korea escapes from belonging to their acknowledged sphere of interest;
- f) The position of Russia remains for the time being limited to that of an observer.

Hence the first conclusion to be drawn is that the geopolitical conditions regarding the Korean peninsula will remain unaffected for the time being – the peninsula remains divided. The second conclusion follows, namely that the crucial influence lies in Beijing. It shall then be repeated that the position of China seems still to be tied to the concept of control of territory but that this attitude may be gradually reconsidered in the future.

THE NUCLEAR ISSUE

At the present stage the range of vision is dominated by the question of North Korea's nuclear program and production of nuclear arms, more specifically according to technological expertise, its plutonium-reprocessing capabilities. Pyongyang's negotiating methods are, according to western standards, appallingly crude and uncouth and, for that reason regarded as counterproductive. The North Koreans should, it is supposed, arrive at better deals if they applied softer tactics. Apparently however, they follow another logic and their way of thinking is worth while contemplating in order to improve one's own tactics.

The means of power of the North Koreans are negligible. In order to survive under present circumstances they must *either* make themselves agreeable to and liked by the surrounding powers *or* impose enough fear to be respected by them. The North Koreans apparently regard the first alternative as below their dignity which leaves us the second – the threat of a suicidal attack which is a way to convey fear, a reaction probably more cherished in Pyongyang than respect. North Korea has a solid experience of being alone in upholding dissident extremist attitudes even towards superior powers as is time and again demonstrated also in the present negotiations. Now it draws the consequences of finding itself on the brink of disaster to conduct brinkmanship politics, because being troublesome cannot render the situation worse than it already is, especially when considering that Pyongyang draws reckless conclusions of the fact that its worst enemies have manifested their preference for contributing to keeping the economically and politically bankrupt state alive instead of letting it fall over the brink. Furthermore they also – rightfully – feel safe in the conviction of being protected by belonging to an acknowledged Chinese sphere of interest. In order to assert their independence in the present situation they see no alternative to continuously presenting new threats in order to negotiate the price for recalling them. And better threats than nuclear armament are unimaginable and give Pyongyang the means for endless negotiations. Because of its weakness Pyongyang has no other option than to make negotiations perpetual – as soon as they would result in an agreement the existence of the regime would be jeopardized. This explains the frustrating character of the present negotiations – bilateral or within the six-party-framework or any other forum – and contains an assurance that all future negotiations will follow the same pattern. This is unavoidable because it is the construction principle of the present Korean order.

The negotiating partners have to accept this sad state of affairs or to face the problems of shaping an alternative Korean order. Some sketches discussing the contradictory characteristics of the Korean question indicate that time is far from ripe for a settlement:

a) On the south side of the table of negotiations (i.e. USA, Japan and South Korea) a primary aim would be to induce China to take a more responsible share of the control of North Korean nuclear negotiating tactics. The reaction against the North Korean nuclear ambitions and the efforts to control them has become a charge that representatives of the south have taken upon themselves. Also the bill for keeping the DPRK alive is mainly paid by the south. Both questions should rather be considered as belonging to the responsibilities of the world community. But China retains a better control of the situation by limiting itself to get sympathy for reasonable attitudes. It skillfully hides behind the North Korean outbursts, threats and ruptures, while patiently registering how the North Korean dependence upon China slowly returns to the 'historically natural' situation. This might be a game that Beijing plays more with Pyongyang than with the southern powers.

b) However, if the present negotiations are cut off or if the North Korean regime for any other reason should envisage its own imminent collapse, a suicidal exit (comparable to that of Hitler in his Berlin bunker) should probably not be excluded. It seems to be more in accordance with North Korean mentality than a quiet and peaceful resignation. As discussed under c) China alone in all likelihood would be able to prevent it – but then it must take place under circumstances suitable to China and at the pace decided by Beijing. In the present situation China is clearly best served by a *status quo*, i.e. to retain North Korea in the acknowledged Chinese sphere of interest while continuing its own economic reforms in a peaceful world. For the Chinese the present climate of negotiations appears favourable, with the south participants both contributing to the support of the DPRK and being occupied by the maneuvers of the erratic North Koreans. The nuclear issue is appraised as being well suited to limit the options of the other negotiating partners to frustration and preventing them from taking initiatives.

c) After all, Pyongyang's nuclear threats have an inbuilt limit, preventing them from being put into practice. While brinkmanship politics are risky, brinkmanship actions are uncontrollable. Nuclear war threats belonged to the tactics of the Cold War, which is past history for all but a few odd nations. Nuclear arms can be used only once as the effect in all likelihood would be suicidal. Using them would result in condemnations from the whole world. A North Korean resort to such warfare would therefore put Beijing to the detestable choice between abandoning or occupying North Korea. Abandonment would be tantamount to procrastinating the return to the 'historically normal' situation, while forsaking it appears to be incompatible with established Chinese politics. An occupation then appears more likely but the risks are too high as brinkmanship actions are uncontrollable. And the costs seem to be uncalled for – the world's political climate could deteriorate in a way that would affect China's economic progress, which is its first priority. Time is on the side of Beijing and why then take upon itself the whole charge of feeding and re-building North Korea? It seems utmost unlikely that Beijing would ever permit Pyongyang to cross the brink. And China is the only power that Koreans have always respected.

d) If the present negotiations on North Korea's nuclear ambitions were to be solved no further meetings would be required. The fate of North Korea would then in all likelihood be to fall into oblivion, something which in its turn implies that it would begin gliding back into the arms of China, i.e. the restoration of the 'historically natural' situation. Such a development implies China assuming the responsibility for the elimination of the North Korean nuclear threat, and it is not unlikely that this solution would meet with almost general agreement – the exception being Pyongyang which, however, would have problems escaping this fate. This

last conclusion is admittedly based on the conviction that Pyongyang will not be capable of outwitting Beijing. This scenario would in other words not reflect North Korean priorities. They prefer an infinite survival.

e) Korean nationalism is strong, North Korean is boundless. The traditional Chinese domination was never popular and the Japanese occupation was detested. For the Korean people, furthermore, reunification has been called a categorical imperative. All the same, political realities for the time being make a reunification unlikely.

CONCLUSIONS

The discussion above indicates that, for the time being, a lasting solution of the Korean problem depends on the attitudes of China towards circumstances related to the 'historically natural' situation. Peace as well as an acceptable atmosphere in general will be upheld and the situation even improved at the pace at which China will embrace the concept of control of economy being preferable to that of control of territory.

South Korea has already opted for status quo as preferable to reunification with an impoverished North. A reunification under renewed de facto Chinese vassalage seems to be an even worse alternative. As a consequence South Korea's preference must be to fortify its present position.

The outside powers will continue to induce China to take a greater responsibility for North Korean affairs and negotiation practices, aiming at avoiding war and nuclear threats. Peace has a price tag. The price seems to be a continuous contribution to the build-up of a normal economy in North Korea, that is able to provide its population with food, healthcare, energy and a viable industry to employ its working force. It should be born in mind that measures to this effect are unavoidable under all circumstances. China will be expected to cooperate more in kind than in cash. Furthermore the reconstruction of North Korea should preferably be made the responsibility of the world community, that is an international (UN) or regional (Asian or Pacific) institution, with the task of having living standards in North Korea steadily approaching those of South Korea. The reunification issue could thus be officially honored but delayed because of economic realities. This means continued tedious negotiations.

SURREALISTIC NEGOTIATIONS

The three factors that have put their imprint on the North Koreans, the isolation, the ingrained but subconscious Confucianism and their own brand of Marxism-leninism, make them rather odd negotiators. They have their own frames of reference, based on other concepts of life, politics and morals which render meetings of minds and compromises more or less unattainable. As related, they are convinced of possessing not only the communist recipe for the future but they are also certain of representing the inherited moral prototype, all others being wrong-doers. A negotiator owning these qualities sees no reason to change position. Why compromise if one is right? They are immune to arguments. Negotiations are fruitless. Next time they will just repeat "facts", that is their point of view. The pattern is well known from half a century of negotiations in Panmunjom.

Under such conditions negotiating with them is utterly frustrating. It might then be tempting to demand unconditional surrender, which is very satisfactory for the vanity of the stronger party. That will, however, not yield any long lasting results. Take for example the peace treaty of Versailles. The victors wallowed in success and in the long run unavoidably suffered from complete failure, manifesting itself in a new war. All forms of humiliating a negotiating partner are nothing but expressions of vanity, which as a rule undermines the outcome.

A successful result needs forethought. What is the likely limit of concessions acceptable to the other party? What measures are needed to make the result long-lasting? The negotiations in question suffer from the difficulty that the North Korean regime obviously is doomed. It does not face, it has already passed the limit of economic and political disaster. For this reason it is meaningless to threaten them with sanctions because their conditions are already unbearable. The regime is surviving because, as already underlined, no outsider wants to take charge of the bankrupt estate.

As a consequence the North Korean rulers now feel safe enough to bargain with brinkmanship tactics in order to get as much as possible out of the negotiations, not least because time to survive is an end in itself. The only argument and weapon they have learnt to trust is to threaten, with breaking off talks, firing a missile or testing a nuclear device. In this way they will succeed in continuing the talks, always preparing the ground for the next round of talks, and the next and so on. The poor knowledge of the outside world assists them in making unrealistic proposals, to their own advantage as well as disadvantage. An honest negotiator must say no to their exaggerations and simultaneously realize that he has in the long run nothing to gain from exploiting their shortcomings and lack of experience – successful diplomacy must be based on honesty (sheer force does not constitute diplomacy). But both maps and compasses may be misleading when dealing with North Koreans. The question arises if they can be trusted to decide by themselves how far their brinkmanship tactics shall be allowed to go as their arguments all too often seem to be variations on the theme of suicidal actions. This means that face-saving formulas repeatedly have to be procured.

Confronted with such contradictory facts and circumstances a negotiator with the North Koreans sooner or later discovers that he in real life does not negotiate with them but with himself. He will be impelled to work out, all by himself, a balanced solution respecting the above-mentioned conditions and present it to the party on the other side of the table. In order to keep up appearances his proposal must contain some modalities that can be discussed and changed. For the same reason it must also take time and efforts to reach every agreement. Add to this that basically it must in principle be acceptable to both parties from the outset and far-sighted enough to be resistant to future challenges. How much food and oil is the outside world prepared to give and on what conditions, this time and or after the next round? The negotiations are even further distorted by the fact that somebody anyway has to give the goods to the North Koreans in order to forestall famine. Then comes the final test – to direct the performance on the stage of real life, that is the negotiating table.

It might seem to be art for art's own sake – but it is diplomacy for the sake of peace.

All reflections and comments rendered above just serve to underline that negotiating with North Koreans is a very special undertaking and that the negotiators need strong support, much sympathy and endless patience not only from their superiors but also, and that is important, from both media and from public opinion at home as well as world wide.