

A state of crisis in North-East Asia - The North Korea issue

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The Korean crisis has gone from chronic to acute since the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States. Against a backdrop of general instability, it is being played out on three levels: the world relationship of forces between powers; the strong tensions at work throughout East Asia; the breakdown or the maintenance of the status quo between the two Koreas. To this, let us add the situation in the USA, where Trump is tempted to compensate for his failures in domestic politics by creating a climate of national mobilization against an external threat - whether it be Russian, Chinese or North Korean.

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The stakes of the Korean crisis are so numerous that the uncertainties are great and there are real dangers of “uncontrolled slippages”.

A peace never signed

The Korean War (1950-53) dates back to 65 years ago – but no peace treaty was signed, only an armistice. The peninsula is still officially in a state of war – a situation that is not simply formal. In particular, the United States hopes to win a victory that escaped it in the last century.

Peninsulas often occupy a disputed geostrategic position and that is definitely the case here. Japanese influence was asserted at the end of the nineteenth century, at the expense of China, militarily defeated by the first Asian imperialism. In 1910, the country was simply annexed by Tokyo. It regained its independence only in 1945 with the capitulation of Japan. Moscow and Washington then decided to disarm the Japanese army themselves, creating two zones of occupation, north and south of the 38th parallel.

In the south, an influential committee made up of communists and left nationalists proclaimed the creation of a People’s Republic, opposing the Provisional Government of Syngman Rhee that the United States supported. This struggle was endogenous; it was “exported” neither by Moscow nor by Beijing nor by Kim Il Sung. Washington retaliated by establishing a military regime in Seoul. The US Army suppressed the national independence committees, relying on the Japanese police, Japanese officials and their Korean collaborators. In 1948, Syngman Rhee was elected President of the

Republic of Korea (South Korea). Communist guerrillas resisted the establishment of his dictatorial power. The People's Republic was in its turn proclaimed in North Korea – with clandestine elections organized in the South.

It was in this context of civil war in the South that the Korean conflict broke out in 1950. It quickly took on an international dimension. Under the flag of the United Nations, the United States sent a powerful expeditionary force. The army of the North was driven back to the edge of the Chinese border. Beijing (which wanted to devote itself to the reconstruction of its own country) entered the lists, pushing back the US forces to the 38th parallel. The front stabilized and, in 1953, a demilitarized zone four kilometres wide was constituted between the two states – becoming in fact one of the richest natural reserves on the planet.

What Philippe Pons calls the Korean “communist nebula” consisted of four components: the internal resistance, exiles in the Soviet Union, the Ya’nan group having rallied to the Chinese Communist Party and a unit of partisans operating in China without having joined the CCP. Kim Il Sung led this unit. He only returned to North Korea a month after the Russian army. Moscow favoured his rise to the head of the new regime, although his faction was very much in a minority to the leadership of the Korean Communist Party. He did not, however, become Moscow’s liegeman. During the 1950s and 1960s, he consolidated his power through a series of purges. The first to be sacrificed were the communists of the interior, eliminated on the occasion of rigged trials. The “pro-Soviets” and “pro-Chinese” later suffered a similar fate. The regime became despotic, then dynastic.

A heavily-armed region

Despite the Sino-US rapprochement that began with the entry of the People’s Republic of China into the UN Security Council (1971) and Nixon’s trip to Beijing (1972), conditions were never ripe to put a definitive end to the state of war in the Korean Peninsula. The United States maintained the military forces that they had strengthened during the Vietnam War, which were particularly powerful in North-East Asia. China did not want to take the risk, in the event of Korea’s reunification, of seeing US forces camping on its borders. No German-style solution, therefore, only a prolonged freezing of the situation.

Moreover, the North Korean regime did not collapse, as was probably expected by American leaders; this was in spite of internal social crises (famine in the second half of the 1990s, shortages...); the implosion of the USSR; the rallying of Beijing to capitalism and the development of its links with South Korea; the death of the Great leader (Kim Il Sung), then that of his son; international sanctions; the pressures exerted and the very concrete attacks carried out by Washington (electronic warfare)... As Philippe Pons notes, “if he had only been a Stalinist, he would not have survived”, despite the recourse to terror. The besieged fortress mentality would have in particular enabled him to mobilize a nationalism/patriotism, ethnic rather than political, forged under the Japanese occupation and to build a “national narrative” linking the recent past to the resilience of a “guerrilla state”.

The interest of this question lies in the fact that it makes it possible to understand why US policy has failed, the permanent threat reinforcing the ideological mechanisms of survival of the regime. Pyongyang has also learned a lesson from the present international situation: only possession of nuclear weapons effectively protects an “enemy” country from Western intervention.

The chain of events that followed the announcement of the North Korean nuclear programme could probably have been stopped on the basis of the agreements negotiated by Washington in 1994 under the presidency of Bill Clinton; but these agreements were unilaterally broken by George Bush, who

also placed North Korea in the “axis of evil”. The Obama administration basically maintained the same posture. The large-scale US-South Korean joint aviation manoeuvres have as a theme a landing or infiltrations in the North. An entire electronic warfare system has been put in place to sabotage at a distance the North Korean programmes.

A window of opportunity has closed with the rise of Sino-American tensions in East Asia. The entire region is now on a war footing. In the South China Sea, Beijing has conquered the initiative. Seven artificial islands have been created, on which military installations, airport runways and missile bases have been built. The Chinese weapons programme is developing and a second aircraft carrier has just been launched, entirely built within the country (the hull of the first was purchased from Russia).

Under these conditions, the United States is all the more determined to maintain its control over maritime straits, thanks to the Seventh Fleet, as well as its military predominance in North-East Asia. It possesses a tremendous network of bases, in South Korea, Japan and Okinawa in particular, and of allied armies (South Korea and Japan).

The escalation continues. Washington has just installed a base of THAAD anti-missile missiles in South Korea, officially charged with destroying North Korean missiles. However, given their scope, THAAD missiles can operate over a large part of China. In this way, they neutralize China’s nuclear deterrent. Consequently, China, in order to protect its deterrent, is planning the modernization and the deployment of its strategic submarines in the oceans.

Although supposed to have only self-defence forces, Japan already has the sixth-biggest military fleet in the world, including four helicopter carriers. The government and the military-industrial complex are trying to get rid of the remaining political obstacles to complete rearmament - including nuclear rearmament - despite the explicitly pacifist Constitution and the strength of antimilitarist feeling in the population.

The North Korean programme, the US anti-missile shield in South Korea, the expansion and modernization of Chinese strike capability, the projects of the Japanese militarist right ... The infernal cycle of provocations and counter-provocations has relaunched the nuclear arms race in the Far East. All the regimes concerned are responsible for it and the question of who fired the first shot of the Korean War is no longer important in the face of such a disaster.

The will to power

The Donald Trump “factor” adds further uncertainty to a situation that is already very dangerous. He diverted a US aircraft carrier and its flotilla in order to position them off Korea; in the course of his declarations he blows militarist hot and diplomatic cold.

However, two elements are particularly disturbing. During the first hundred days of his presidency, Trump accumulated setbacks on the domestic level, countered by the judges, the states and the Congress, Republican as it is. He is confronted by a series of massive marches and mobilizations in defence of women, immigrants, the Earth, scientific research, against his fiscal programme... He is seeking to get things under control by invoking external threats, reversing his Russian and Syrian policy, affirming the unparalleled firepower of the United States, ordering spectacular strikes in Syria and in Afghanistan to show that the US can act without warning and without consulting its allies...

Moreover, Trump has formed a government of businessmen and generals. He has promised a

massive weapons programme, but his funding may in turn be challenged by Congress. The general staff and the military-industrial complex are concerned. Continually invoking the North Korean danger is one way of putting pressure on the parliamentarians.

The bombing carried out in Afghanistan made no sense in this theatre of operations. A network of underground Al Qaeda shelters has been destroyed, but this organization is only a minor component of the conflict. The real enemy is the Taliban, who were probably politically strengthened by the destructive violence of the attack. An international "signal", including towards China and North Korea, was certainly given as to US determination, but there is more. The "mother of bombs", the most powerful bomb in the world, had never been used. However, all weapons must be tested in a real situation.

This is why, in August 1945, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were victims of nuclear attacks: it was necessary to hurry to compare the effects of the A-bomb based on enriched uranium and the A-bomb through the plutonium route before the Japanese capitulation was officially announced - and so much the worse for the multitude of human guinea pigs, for a civilian population that was annihilated and irradiated in the nuclear holocaust.

Armaments must be produced - and therefore used. Such is the warmongering logic of the military-industrial complex.

Trump has reasons that diplomatic reason ignores. He knows nothing of the world (apart from business) and does not ask for the advice of the embassies or the departments of the administration concerned. His political action remains erratic; since his election, he has more than once sharply changed his orientation on the international level. He is a factor of instability and unpredictability, and the allies of the United States are aware of this, in Japan as well as in South Korea and Australia. US unilateralism worries them. They know that the White House can make decisions that have far-reaching consequences without even consulting them.

The peoples speak up

The reasons for hope, however, are not lacking. The South Korean population overthrew, after months of giant mobilizations, a corrupt presidency and a militarist party. It opts, for the most part, for a policy of negotiation rather than provocation towards the North. Symbolic actions have been taken, as by those forty feminist activists who crossed the demarcation line together.

Demonstrations took place near Seongju, where the anti-missile shield THAAD is based, and clashed with the police. A coalition of movements also opposes the establishment of a naval base in the southern island of Jeju.

In Japan, civic resistance to the remilitarization of the country remains very deep, despite North Korean missiles landing in the sea off the coast of the archipelago - despite also the constant propaganda of the radical right. In Okinawa, opposition to US military bases does not falter.

Across the region, the idea is making its way that only the demilitarization of maritime space will make it possible to prevent war.

The stakes in the conflict in East Asia are very directly global. Anti-war movements should give their support to Asian resistance - in Europe, but more importantly, in the United States.

Pierre Rousset

A reference book on North Korea

Editions Gallimard have published a book by Philippe Pons, *Corée du Nord. Un Etat guérilla en mutation* (2016, 710 pp, €34.50). It is a particularly welcome initiative in that this country is not well known. The author, a journalist with *Le Monde*, has lived for decades in Japan and has travelled extensively on the Korean peninsula, on both sides of the demarcation line.

The purpose of this book, says Philippe Pons, is to “try to understand why North Korea is what it has become, by trying to unravel the mechanisms of its regime and to situate it in a historical context, in order to understand the socio-cultural anchorage, the dynamics and the social changes underway. This does not mean, it must be said, ignoring a dark reality...” In so doing, the author challenges many commonplaces. It is the work of a historian attached to the study of cultures (see his publications on Japan) and not just a journalist. Reading this book is warmly recommended to those who want to go beyond clichés.

Chronology

1894-1895: First Sino-Japanese War (victory of Japan).

1904-1905: Russo-Japanese War (victory of Japan).

1910: Annexation of Korea by Japan.

1931: Conquest of Manchuria by Japan.

1937-1945: Second Sino-Japanese War and Second World War.

1945: Liberation of Korea. Creation of two zones of occupation in the North (Russia) and the South (United States). Civil war in the South

1948: Proclamation of the Republic of Korea in the South (Syngman Rhee) and the North Korean People's Republic (Kim Il Sung).

1950-1953: Korean War.

1994: Death of Kim Il Sung. His son Kim Jong Il succeeds him.

1994-2001: Agreements to freeze the North Korean nuclear programme signed with the US administration of Bill Clinton.

2001: Election of George W. Bush in the United States. Unilateral breaking of agreements.

2006: First underground nuclear test in North Korea.

2009-2017: Development of a network of military bases in the South China Sea by Beijing. In 2017, it becomes operational.

2009-2017: Barack Obama presidency in the United States

2009: North Korean nuclear test.

2011: Death of Kim Jong Il. His son Kim Jong Un succeeds him

2012-: Abe Shinzō, Japanese Prime Minister.

2013: Missile Crisis. North Korean nuclear test.

2016: Election of Donald Trump in the United States (taking office in January 2017). Dismissal of President Park Geun-hye in South Korea.

2017: North Korean missile launches. Installation of the THAAD anti-missile missile system in South Korea, where elections are scheduled for May. Continuation of the arms race in the region. State of crisis.

P.S.

* Translation IVP. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>