

The Korean Problem and East Asian Security

Reinhard Drifte

The vagaries of the intensified and broadened North-South dialogue and the strengthened links between North Korea and the Soviet Union since 1984 have again drawn attention to the intricate linkage between the Korean Peninsula and East Asian security. Basically, these developments as such do not amount to a reversal of the situation or a change in external interests: we have witnessed a North-South dialogue on the Red Cross level at the beginning of the 1970s and a closer North Korean-Soviet relationship in the 1960s. However, there have been developments on the Korean Peninsula as well as around it which may change the Korean equitation and therefore demand a new analysis.

Peace enhancing developments

It has been conventional wisdom so far that the status quo on the Korean Peninsula is in the interest of the major powers - United States, Soviet Union, China, and Japan - and that this has prevented another outbreak between the two Korean states. The first three powers have contributed to the establishment of a rough military balance and the moderation of the leaders on both sides. There have been a couple of developments which have strengthened the forces of peace of the Korean equitation:

1. The most important one is undoubtedly the opening of China to the West and the acceptance by China to play an active and positive role on the Korean Peninsula. This has resulted in increased pressure by China on the North Korean leadership to moderate their belligerency, to open their country to the West and to imitate the Chinese economic opening. The Chinese leadership has clearly shown its distrust of adventurous North Korean actions such as the Rangoon bombing. By September 1983, the Chinese leaders had started to discuss tension reduction and reunification of North and South in a meeting with Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger.⁽¹⁾ As a result China started to act as an intermediary between North Korea and the US and forwarded a North Korean proposal for tripartite talks between North Korea, the US and South Korea in October 1983. However, the following day, October 9, North Korea staged the bombing of the South Korean cabinet in Rangoon, thus greatly embarrassing Peking. Despite this setback in its first attempt to mediate, Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang informed President Reagan of North Korea's proposal for tripartite negotiations prior to Pyongyang's public disclosure of the offer on the occasion of

his visit to the US in January 1984.(2) China has since then taken up the North Korean proposal at several times whereas the Soviet Union has not commented on it.(3) A very clear Chinese signal of moderation to Pyongyang has also been the comment by Zhang Xiangshan, an advisor to the CCP International Liaison Department, to a visiting delegation from the Japan Socialist Party in June 1984, stating that "if the D.P.R.K. (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) strikes the first blow and starts a war, China would be in no position to support her". This comment goes even further than the frequent Chinese statements that North Korea has no aggressive designs on the Korean Peninsula.(4)

North Korea has promulgated a joint venture law which is similar to the Chinese one and two joint ventures are now under way with France and Japan. Without the shift in China's attitude the North-South dialogue would not have reached the intensity as it did in 1985. However, as during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Chinese politics have broadened the gap between both societies. China's activist interest in the status quo on the Peninsula clearly contradicts North Korean interest in unifying the Peninsula. China's increased unofficial and economic relations with the South have alarmed the North. Moreover, China cannot, at least for the time being, deliver advanced weapons or technology which only the Soviet Union can provide.

2. Japan has abandoned its passive foreign policy stance towards the Korean Peninsula and is consulting closely with both China and the US on the problem of Korea. In 1985 it brought the Korean issue into the final communique of the Bonn Summit. However, Japan is standing clearly on the side of South Korea although it is weary of missing the boat as in 1972 in case the US should suddenly decide to recognize Pyongyang. Although Japan is exactly in the opposite situation of China, Tokyo has important economic interest in the South and is vulnerable to South Korean pressure due to its past. Both countries could only fulfill their mediating function to a maximum if they work closely together. China's positive involvement on the Peninsula is on the other hand limited by its national interest of not going as far as risking North Korea becoming a Soviet satellite or doing prejudice to its own policy on reunification. In how far this can be offset by a normalization of Sino-Soviet relations or at least a reduction of tension between the two communist powers is difficult to judge because of the background of irreconcilable and countervailing geostrategic and ideological factors between them.

3. A third positive development is the economic strength of South Korea and its growing integration into the world economy. This reduces the South Korean appetite for external adven-

tures and increases the interest of the Soviet Union and China in economic relations with the South. Growing trade, exchange of visitors, and sport events with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe prove this. However, South Korea has a debt of almost US\$ 50 bn, over 70% of its exports are in 10 product lines, and it is very dependent on the expansion of world trade. On the other hand, this vulnerability increases the pressure on the South to pursue an active foreign policy and win trade opportunities with more countries. Another negative result of the economic strength of South Korea is the growing international isolation of North Korea which can only offer limited economic aid and military training and hardware.

4. Last but not least there is the intensification and broadening of the North-South dialogue in an unprecedented way. It extends now to five levels: talks on economic cooperation, on family reunion by the Red Cross of both sides, on a non-aggression pact and the draft of a constitution for a reunified Korea by parliamentarians from both sides, on joint activities during the 1988 Olympics, and on military disengagement at Panmunjom in the Military Armistice Commission (MAC). There have even been reports on secret high level exchanges of leaders. The only minor breakthrough, however, has been on family reunion when 151 North Koreans entered Seoul in September for a three day visit and the same number of South Koreans went to Pyongyang to meet their relatives. When the South proposed a similar exchange for the lunar new year, the North turned it down and demanded instead an opening of the border. In the economic talks no concrete agreement has yet been reached and procedural matters led to a bottleneck. The parliamentary talks are bogged down because the South proposes the establishment of a joint council to draft a constitution for a reunified Korea while the North wants a non-aggression pact. In the sports talk the South as well as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is not willing to give in to the North's demand for co-hosting the 1988 Olympic Games but has offered to share some preliminary events. North Korea showed great eagerness in its proposals for a reduction of military tensions in the MAC in Panmunjom. In a meeting of the MAC in July North Korea proposed the removal of heavy weapons and fortification around the Panmunjom area and to reduce the guard number on each side. This was turned down by the American side on the grounds that this would be disadvantageous to it for geographical reasons. In December the North proposed again the MAC to stop large-scale military exercises completely and gradually to stop all other military exercises. While the North-South dialogue is being pursued, all military exercises should be suspended. This was again rejected by the American side. On 11 January 1986 North Korea announced that it would not conduct large-scale military exercises from 1 February on, and would

not conduct any military exercises while the North-South dialogue is under way. Little later, the North suspended all talks in order to protest against the forthcoming Team Spirit manoeuvre. North Korea thus acted in the same way as last year. Pyongyang's reaction would have been much more convincing had it first accepted the American invitation for sending military observers to Team Spirit as a preliminary step.

The American side, on the other hand, accused North Korea of holding secret, unannounced major military exercises along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in 1985 and there were reports on North Korea having deployed a newly formed artillery corps 50km behind the DMZ. Another obstacle to the progress of the North-South dialogue is the North Korean desire to negotiate directly with the US rather than with South Korea while at the same time trying to reduce the American involvement in the Korean Peninsula. The North expresses clearly a concern that the US is substituting its proposal for tripartite talks of two years ago with the North-South dialogue.

Against this background it is difficult to judge where the North-South dialogue resumes after the end of Team Spirit 1986. The events have shown that there are strong influences in both countries to continue the dialogue. While the North sees it as a means to further its wish for tripartite talks and to weaken the South's government resolve to quarantine the North, the South is under pressure to address a burning humanitarian problem and the government sees a weakening of one strong justification for an authoritarian regime. So far the North-South dialogue has not yet created an irresistible momentum of its own and both sides can stop it as the North has just demonstrated for a second time in 12 months. Once such a momentum has come into being, however, the North will be much more vulnerable because of the increased contact with a much more open and liberal society.

Negative developments and factors

1. The inherently most destabilizing factor is the potential instability of both Korean states. The transition of power within the Kim dynasty has not yet taken place although there are many indications that the process is well under way. We will only know when Kim Il-sung is no longer alive. Even if the transition is peaceful we do not know whether this means the beginning of an adventurous policy of an unexperienced young leader, the continuation of the present policy, or an opening of the country to the West. There seem to be more indications for the first possibility. Kim Jong-il has been blamed for the Rangoon bombing and is quoted as having said that he will unify

the Peninsula within this decade. The economic situation of North Korea is a further destabilizing factor. The country is not only continuing to fall back against the South, but is devoting more resources to military efforts. Even the most closed and authoritarian society in the world will not be able to suppress forever popular aspirations for more freedom and economic prosperity.

The South has been experiencing since 1985 a radicalized opposition. The newly-formed opposition party, the New Democratic Korea Party (NDKP), increased its pressure on the government and the South Korean parliament experienced a series of heated debates which sometimes did not exclude the use of physical force. However, the NDKP has been weakened by the defection of 12 dietmen at the end of 1985. In addition the cohesion of the party is threatened by its coalition character and the divergent influence of Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae Jung who cannot join the party due to a government ban on them but who are 'advisors' to the party. Some NDKP dietmen are hesitating whether they should stay within the National Assembly or take their political struggle to the street. The opposition has now found a rallying symbol in the drive to change the constitution in order to realize the direct election of the next president, and many groups outside the opposition party have joined this campaign. It is not clear how far the party will be able to control the political forces thus unleashed. The student movement has again picked up momentum and in 1985 there have been over ten occupations by students. In one incident an office building of the ruling Democratic Justice Party (DJP) was occupied and set on fire. Increasingly the student demand not only Chun Doo-hwan's resignation and radical political reforms, but turn also against the US. As a result the American USIS library in Seoul and some regional American cultural centers were occupied. The demands included an investigation of the American participation in the bloody Kwangju suppression in 1980 and an end to American pressure on the country to open its markets. The latter request certainly reflects a concern which enjoys wide sympathy in the population as well as in the government and could in the long run be serious for the bilateral relationship. The increased unrest has led to harsher repression by the government such as long prison terms and accusations under the stricter anti-communism law.

Much will depend on how convincing President Chun Doo-hwan is concerning his will to resign in 1988 and permit a peaceful transfer of presidential power in 1988. Even if he succeeds in doing it - and this New Year declaration concerning his readiness for a peaceful transfer of power was a positive move - the coming two years will be an acrobatic act because of the divers contending political groups and aspirations. Another precondition is - as mentioned above - continued econo-

mic prosperity which means open world markets and no major world recession.

2. Ties between North Korea and the Soviet Union have become considerably closer in 1985, a development which started with Kim Il-sung's visit to Moscow in April 1984. In August 1985 the Soviet First Deputy Premier Geydar Aliyev visited Pyongyang for the celebration of the 40th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japan. He headed a massive delegation of 23 separate government groups and high ranking military officials. At the same time three Soviet warships arrived in Wonsan. In January this year Foreign Minister Shevardnadze visited North Korea, and after a visit of the North Korean Premier to Moscow, Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov agreed in principle to visit North Korea. In December both countries initialled a Treaty of Boundaries of the Economic Waters and Continental Shelf. In December 1985 the Soviet Union concluded an agreement with North Korea to build the first nuclear power plant in the country after it had joined in the same month the NPT (Nuclear Power Treaty).

The growing Soviet influence in North Korea is not by definition a negative development if the Soviet Union uses its increased political and economic leverage on the North in a constructive way. There is no reason to doubt that the Soviet Union still has no interest in any new outbreak of violence in Korea. However, Soviet arms deliveries are fanning the arms race between the North and the South and provide the North with a more modern autonomous arms production capability. The latter means a further decrease of external means to moderate the North. In May 1985 the first MIG-23 Floggers started to arrive in North Korea and it is believed that the Soviet Union is going to deliver altogether 50. In addition the Soviet Union is delivering more advanced missiles. In return North Korea has given the Soviet Air Force the right to overfly North Korea which shortens the way from Siberia to the South China Sea and Soviet bases in Vietnam, makes reconnaissance flights off the Chinese coast and permits to avoid detection. Some North Korean ports are now open for the Soviet Pacific Fleet.

The United States is not completely innocent in the delivery of Soviet MIG-23 to the North. American aircraft deliveries to the South have destroyed an implicit bilateral agreement on arms transfers. For years the Soviet Union as well as the United States refrained from selling their most sophisticated aircraft to their respective Korean clients. However, at the beginning of the 1980s the United States started to sell F-4 and F-5 (the latter being coproduced in Korea since 1982) to South Korea and agreed to supply 36 F-16 starting in April 1985. Moreover it is questionable whether the sale of F-16 is really necessary to keep the military balance.

At the same time North Korea is continuing its forward deployment of troops and weapons to the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone). Forward deployment is not by definition an indication for aggressive designs, it can also be designed to offset inferior military capability. In 1979, when Chun Doo-hwan used South Korean troops at the DMZ for his coup d'etat – the US was very upset about this – and the South Korean political situation was rather unclear, the military deterrent still prevented the North to take advantage of the situation. The only conceivable scenario for a North Korean attack would be a situation close to civil war in the South (with strong material and manpower support by North Korean agents) which could result in the weakening not only of the South Korean military deterrent, but also the Korea-based American military forces.

There is an overall military balance on the Peninsula in favour of the South, but only due to the American conventional and nuclear deterrent in the South. The South is seeking to become less dependent on the American deterrent by an ambitious arms buildup. At the beginning of 1986 the American administration requested military aid to South Korea amounting to US\$ 232.2 million, compared with US\$ 164.5 million in 1985. The North maintains not only a 700,000 men strong military force, but also a 100,000 men commando force. The growing military forces on both sides and the forward deployment of North Korean forces in a context of great inherent domestic instabilities is highly dangerous since it reduces political and military control. In such a climate the spark to the powder keg may not only come from the North. After the Rangoon bombing the US had to exert pressure on the South Korean military in order to counter demands for reprisal actions against the North which could only have resulted in the outbreak of another full-fledged Korean War. (5)

The Korean Peninsula and the superpower rivalry in East Asia

The major link of the Korean security to the East Asian region is still the superpower rivalry. Soviet military relations with North Korea have to be seen in the greater context of the Soviet Union's ambition to catch up with the United States worldwide and in particular in East Asia, and to counter China. The Soviet Union has since the 1970s been devoting much more resources to the strengthening of its military potential in East Asia, focusing on the Pacific Fleet, the air force and missile force. It has increased its military activity as is shown by more overflies and reconnaissance activity. The benefit and regional impact of overfly rights over North Korea have already been mentioned. In October 1985 it was reported for the first time that Chinese aircraft had scrambled from Shanghai to intercept Soviet

planes observing the coastal provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang after having entered the Yellow Sea from North Korea. (6) The US has reacted since the beginning of the decade by increasing and modernizing its 3rd and 7th Fleet and by deploying Tomahawk cruise missiles on its units. This military superpower rivalry includes automatically Japan which has been intensifying its military alliance with the US by devoting more resources to its military build-up, by assuming more regional roles like the promised defence of the sea lanes up to 1,000sm, by more joint manoeuvres, by working out of joint operation plans, and by allowing the deployment of more forward-based American weapon systems like the F-16 in Misawa in Northern Japan. Japan is also an important outpost for the American military deterrent on the Korean Peninsula.

American proposals for CBM on the Korean Peninsula

On June 12, 1971 and several times subsequently, the American side proposed that steps be taken to genuinely demilitarize the so-called DMZ, without any positive echo from North Korea. (7) On 28 December 1981 and 23 January 1982 the United States proposed to North Korea and China to send military observers to the Team Spirit 1982 exercise which has been staged every spring since 1976. The North Korean response was predictably negative since it would have amounted to a legitimization of the American military presence on the Korean Peninsula, a presence which North Korea has been regarding with the greatest hostility. The Chinese side could only follow and decline the American invitation. On the other hand, it was very easy for the United States to come forward with such a proposal since North Korea, despite larger forces, has no obvious military advantage. Moreover the annual spring manoeuvre has expanded every year and there was no risk involved. The American side has been reiterating the notification of Team Spirit manoeuvres and the invitation to send military observers from the North since then. Aware of the extreme North Korea sensitivity about these annual manoeuvres, the manoeuvre in 1984 - although larger than ever - was conducted in a East-West direction and no longer in a North-South direction. (8) When asked about such advance notification in 1981 by visiting Congressman Stephen Solarz, Kim Il-sung responded that these suggestions were "interesting and worthy of discussion", but said that an agreement was impossible so long as the United States "continued its policy of confrontation with North Korea and of providing military assistance to South Korea". (9)

With the beginning of the North-South dialogue in 1984 and with China acting as a go-between for North Korea and the

United States, the negative North Korean attitude started to change somewhat. In January 1984 the North Korean side proposed again, as mentioned above, tripartite talks between the North and the United States - 'by allowing the South Korean authorities to participate' - on measures to reduce tension. (10) When President Reagan visited Peking in April 1984, Secretary of State Shultz delivered an American proposal to Chinese Foreign Minister Wu Xuequan to be passed on to North Korea which included the following items:

- restoration of the non-military character of the DMZ by pulling forces back and removing heavy weapons from the area;
- regular inspection by teams composed of neutral nations to ensure the non-military character of the DMZ;
- prior notification by the North as well as the South of military exercises;
- mutual assignment of observers to such exercises. (11)

In October 1984 President Ronald Reagan stated in his UN General Assembly speech that CBM would be "an important first step towards peaceful reunification". (12) In an interview with the Washington Post, the visiting North Korean Foreign Minister, Kim Yong-nam, expressed interest in this proposal, but proposed to debate CBM in three-way talks between North Korea, the United States and South Korea: "I would like to clearly state that we are willing to consult and discuss the confidence-building measures raised by Ronald Reagan in his United Nations speech, together with other peaceful issues, in three-way talks of our side, the United States and the South Korean side". However, the American side declined since it favours the Military Armistice Commission (MAC) the forum which also includes China. However, at a meeting of the MAC in Panmunjom on 29 July 1985, the North Korean delegate surprised the other side by proposing negotiations on a series of tension-reducing measures within the Joint Security Area (JSA) by reducing men and arms. (13) The American side promised to study the proposal thoroughly, but in a letter on 26 September it rejected the North Korea proposal saying that it would be disadvantageous to the UNC side because of the geographical configuration. On 6 December North Korea proposed at another meeting of the MAC to stop large-scale military exercises completely and gradually to stop all other military exercises. While the North-South dialogue is being pursued, all exercises should be suspended. This was again rejected by the American side. (14) The biggest obstacle is probably that North Korea wants to use the issue of CBM as a way to negotiate directly with the United States while excluding the South Korean Government as far as possible. The December proposal clearly shows that the North Korean side wants to make the continuation of the North-South dialogue

dependent on a reduction of American military activities on the peninsula. The North Koreans could certainly better demonstrate their seriousness about reducing tensions by accepting as a first step the American invitation to send military observers. In the eyes of Pyongyang, however, this would mean a certain recognition of the right of the American armed forces to be in South Korea. On the other hand, it is strange that the American side never tried to win Japanese or other allied support for its initiative. While the Japanese Government seems to be very cautious and does not want to alienate the South Korean Government, the American side appears overly reluctant to have Japan involved whereas otherwise it attacks the Japanese diplomacy as being too passive.

Conclusions

This article has tried to show that new developments have considerably changed the factors constituting the Korean equation, and that the balance of these developments is far from reassuring. The major positive development, the intensification and broadening of the North-South dialogue, is far from having taken root and developed an irresistible momentum of its own as the interruption of the dialogue by North Korea in January 1985 and 1986 has demonstrated. The argument that the Korean Peninsula is inherently stable because of the absence of fighting since the end of the Korean War and that it can therefore manage to continue to live dangerously, is not very convincing in the light of the ongoing arms competition, the disruptive potential of acts like the Rangoon bombing, and the inherently unstable domestic situation in both Korean states. The situation is nearing a new critical point with the coincidence of the South Korean attempt of a first peaceful transition of power and the staging of the Olympic Games in Seoul in 1988 which the North finds unacceptable without specifying what it means by that.

It is therefore necessary in the first place to control the military arms competition on the Peninsula and thus to contribute to a reduction of tensions not only there, but in the whole region by reducing the involvement of the two superpowers. The North-South dialogue would have more chances in such an environment. The Soviet Union will have to take much more into consideration the impact of her rivalry with the United States on the regional powers in East Asia - including the Korean Peninsula - and show more positive flexibility towards them if it wants to prevent what it fears most (e.g. a heavily armed Japan working more closely together with the United States, or a Washington-Tokyo-Peking axis). In order to control the arms

race on the Peninsula the initiative of at least one of the superpowers is necessary. The US has started with proposals for CBM. Since the two Korean states in their present configuration do not threaten the security interests of the superpowers or does their survival constitute a vital security interest of the US or the Soviet Union (as does Japan for the US) it should be easier for both to keep Korea out of their rivalry. The growing military links between North Korea and the Soviet Union have, however, integrated the North into this rivalry.

The American proposals for CBM have not yet been taken up by the North, and the military links with the Soviet Union may even further discourage it to do so and instead counter with too far reaching and unacceptable proposals of its own. The United States as the militarily stronger side could, however, exert much more pressure on North Korea to be more responsive to CBM by showing more flexibility with the way the annual Team Spirit manoeuvres are pursued.

Notes

- (1) Washington Post, 21.10.1983.
- (2) Washington Post, 13.01.1984.
- (3) Pollack, Jonathan: U.S.-Korea relations: The China factor, in: Journal of Northeast Asian Studies, vol.4, 3(fall 1985), p.19.
- (4) Yomiuri Shimbun, 25.06.1984, quoted in Pollack, op.cit.
- (5) Far Eastern Economic Review, 24.11.1983, p.15; Time, 24.10.1983, p.12.
- (6) Summary of World Broadcast (SWB) FE/8094 i. 29.10.1986.
- (7) North-South relations on the Korean Peninsula. Hearing before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee of Foreign Affairs. US House of Representatives. Washington, 20.03.1984. (in the following quoted as Hearing)
- (8) Research Institute for Peace and Security: Asian Security 1985. Tokyo, 1985, p.104.
- (9) The Korean conundrum. A conversation with Kim Il Sung. Committee on Foreign Affairs. US House of Representatives. Washington, August 1981, pp.9-10.
- (10) Hearing 20.03.1984, op.cit., Appendix 1.
- (11) The Korea Herald, 07.06.1984.
- (12) The Korea Herald, 12.10.1984.
- (13) Far Eastern Economic Review, 08.08.1985, p.10; Washington Post, 06.10.1984.
- (14) SWB FE/8084/A3/1, 17.10.1985;
The Korea Herald, 31.10.1985;
SWB FE/8128/A3/5, 07.12.1985 and 09.12.1985.

Summary

This article reviews the situation of the two Korean states within the context of the East Asian security system, basically supported by the major powers United States, Soviet Union, China, and Japan. There are promising developments brought about f. i. by the opening of China to the West, South Korea's growing integration into the world economy, the promulgation of a joint venture law by North Korea etc. The broadening of the North-South dialogue extends to several levels from talks on economic cooperation to military disengagement in the Military Armistice Commission, but has not yet created an irresistible momentum of its own.

A most important element among the negative developments and factors is the potential instability of both Korean states. The process of transition of power in the North seems to be under way. The South faces a radicalized opposition since 1985. The growing Soviet influence in North Korea can be regarded as a positive development, because the Soviet Union has no interest in any outbreak of violence of Korea. South Korea seeks to become less dependent on the American deterrent by a relatively large arms buildup.

The major link of the Korean security system to the region remains in the superpower rivalry. Military relations with both Korean states have to be judged in the greater context of superpower ambitions in the region. A reduction of tensions can only be attained through demilitarization. Therefore, the United States proposed steps to be taken to demilitarize the so-called Demilitarized Zone. A reduced involvement of the superpowers would mean more chances for the North-South dialogue in Korea. (Red.)