

*Andreas Schild*

Are the US ready for Peace  
with North Korea ?





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# **Are the US ready for Peace with North Korea?**

**Engagement or confrontation**

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# Introduction

The Korean Peninsula and particularly North Korea have been a hotspot of regional and world politics since World War II. The Korean War was concluded in 1953 with an armistice which was not followed by a peace agreement.<sup>1</sup> The end of the Cold War brought the collapse of the communist system of governance and COMECON, the common market of the socialist block. North Korea remained a single remnant with the communist system in place and the same elite in power.

For almost 30 years, the debate on North Korea in the West has been dominated by the dilemma between engagement and confrontation. Under the leadership of the United States the prevailing position, with some rare exceptions, has been rather confrontation or certainly the absence of a political will for engagement.

Dealing with North Korea unavoidably hits the stumbling block of missing basic data and reliable information about the country. This difficulty has been cultivated and fostered by the North Korean authorities. The country today has the reputation of being a “hermit kingdom”. The combination of isolation and being a hot-spot with tensions, military build-up and even danger of war have continuously generated rumours and brought the Korean peninsula to the front pages of the media.

The present paper is intended to contribute to a clearer view of North Korea.

My point of departure is neither science nor politics but subjective experience and observation, which I tried to verify in retrospect by confronting my conclusions with literature and publications. This perspective has evolved through my stay in the country as the person responsible for a United Nations program and as consultant to a bilateral development agency. Working in a foreign culture and non-transparent political environment calls for a minimum of empathy or, worded in a perhaps more modern way, a “rational compassion”<sup>2</sup> in order to be efficient and effective. I want also to stress here a certain sensitivity of a citizen from a small country. I have learnt to be respectful and to try to understand other nations. This is not a moral position, even less a policy perception. From the point of view of a small country this is part of a survival strategy, which gives another perspective and another way of looking at things. Citizens of a world power can definitely afford to disregard such an attitude.

This background provokes me to question some traditional perceptions of the country and common wisdom shared by political scientists and journalists.

Writing about North Korea is a risky venture. Little is known about the country. On the other hand, a lot is being written. The mass media usually take over the opinion of the American mainstream. The state of knowledge is biased and communicated with stereotypes. Even the usual sympathy for a small country normally shown by the Swiss does not work in the case of North Korea.<sup>3</sup>

Anticipating that my position will largely be judged as subjective, incomplete and biased, I want to emphasize that



North Korea is not my country. The political culture and system cannot be further away from what I am aspiring to and what I like. I strongly believe in personal freedom and autonomy of local and smaller units and in a decentralized governance structure. I think also that any political system needs mechanisms of checks and balances: this I badly miss in North Korea. Any political system based on heritage of power develops a bigotry, which is hardly compatible with a democratic vision.

However, I have developed a certain understanding for a system which has evolved in given circumstances and which has survived and been adapted against all odds. I do have a certain admiration for persons who work in this system and make an effort to improve it. Above all, as an intellectual, I have to show respect for this country. It is not only shaped by its leadership and “stone age “communism but also by geopolitical forces and is part of a global and regional power game.

In the first part I try to describe the state of knowledge and give a short historical overview of North Korea since its creation.

The second chapter relates my experience of working in the country. The focus is food security and how the Korean authorities and the international community have been dealing with it. I describe how change is happening without decisions being made.

The final chapter questions some basic assumptions and generally accepted perceptions of North Korea. It makes a

cause for honest negotiations and engagement with the country. My conclusion is that the attitude of the western world under the leadership of the United States has had largely negative consequences instead of creating a conducive atmosphere on the Korean Peninsula and the potential for a peaceful solution.

A prerequisite for a sustainable and peaceful development on the Korean Peninsula is not only North Korea's compliance with international agreements and norms but also a change in American policy.

# **1. The challenge of getting reliable information**

## **1.1. Unknown North Korea**

### **The State of Knowledge**

I asked myself about the pertinence and use of editing impressions experienced 15 years ago. The amazing fact is that the picture we have of North Korea is almost the same as thirty years earlier. North Korea is an unknown country, its policies are enigmatic and the political system is a remnant of the past with no future. North Korea is alternatively named a rogue state or a “hermit kingdom” and a danger to world peace. The country is mostly presented as following irrational and irresponsible policies.

At first sight the geopolitical situation in North East Asia has not changed much either. The country remains isolated and the situation on the Korean Peninsula remains unstable.

For the external observer, it is astonishing that the knowledge of what is happening in the country has not substantially increased. Some interesting books have been written by journalists and by researchers having access to Russian archives, closed up to now. The sources of information remain think-tanks which are either government-financed or are otherwise linked to governments and contain a substantial amount of political

propaganda. Interviews with defectors provide another source. These testimonies are interesting but it is not always possible to distinguish between the personal fate and the political context. One of the only books from a living experience in the country has been written by Felix Abt (*A Capitalist in North Korea. My seven years in the hermit Kingdom*). It did not receive the response it deserved.

There are however quite a substantial number of publications on North Korea. The main topics refer to the nuclear and missile capacity, the three-generation hereditary succession, human rights and the defector issue.

American and Japanese analyses are often influenced by a hostile stance towards North Korea. The research seems to be often disturbed by traditional stereotypes such as irrational behaviour and a stone-age system. These are also the topos flowing into newspaper reports of the Western press. According to a survey conducted by the Japanese government in 2015, over 86 % of the Japanese population consider the abdication issue the major area of interest regarding North Korea.<sup>4</sup>

Information about North Korea accessible to the average citizen in the West has the tendency to be sensational and negatively biased: for example, the South Korean Secret Service reported in April 2014 that Hyong Yong-chol, the Minister of Defence, had been purged and shot with a four-barrel anti-aircraft gun. This report is immediately a number one news item in the international press. After only a few hours, the same service has doubts. A month later a South Korean spokesman says that the execution of the defence minister should be considered a rumour. Even American sources have serious doubts about the execution (see US-Korea Institute of John Hopkins University July 2014).<sup>5</sup>

Even serious research with a minimum of compassion is based on secondary information or on official publications. Knowledge of the factual reality is rather rare and objectively speaking also difficult to investigate. <sup>6</sup> The North Korean authorities do actually very little to avoid the prevailing picture of North Korea as a secretive country.

An important source of information on North Korea has been Vantage Point, a publication by the South Korean press agency Yonhap, which was discontinued in 2016. Most of the articles were based on external observation and without access to primary data. But a lot of articles go beyond the unfriendly stereotypes and make an effort to understand and be objective.

If relations seem to be largely unchanged, the framework conditions and the situation in North Korea have changed substantially.

## **The Korean Peninsula - a Geopolitical Hotspot**

From the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, political and international debate in Northeast Asia has been dominated by one topic: would the Democratic Popular Republic of Korea (DPRK) abandon its international isolation and become a part of the international community? The military build-up and particularly the capacity to develop nuclear weapons (WMD) has been a hot issue since the early 90s and led the countries involved to a tentative settlement by the Framework Agreement 1994.<sup>7</sup>

Two weeks after the signing of the agreement, the American Congress was taken over by the Republicans. The Agreed Framework was declared a political orphan. The following

years were characterized by the disastrous food security situation and diplomatic tensions.

The beginning of the century started on a promising note. The immediate reason for this sudden optimism was labelled as “sunshine policy”. 20 European countries established diplomatic relations. An important step was made by the visit of the President of South Korea to Pyongyang. This was followed by a number of symbolic gestures (e.g. the Prime Minister of Japan presented the regrets of his country for the atrocities committed by his country, particularly during World War II) which helped to thaw diplomatic relations in this part of the world. On the more discreet operational level, the contract for the construction of two light water reactors, a central piece of the Agreed Framework, was finally signed with ABB, a Switzerland- based company.

These diplomatic overtures were followed by initiatives on a more technical level. Some Western countries and particularly the United Nations, through its development programme (UNDP), explored the potential of enhanced international cooperation with North Korea.

The country had gone through a serious crisis first by the decay of the Soviet Union and particularly the end of COMECON, which constituted the market for virtually all North Korean products, and secondly by a period of drought and floods which produced a national disaster of hunger and a huge number of casualties. The international community responded with a largescale humanitarian assistance programme and particularly food aid. The World Food Programme (WFP) of the United Nations was the major player on the scene and its representative headed as Humanitarian Coordinator the UN operations in the country.