

Whither the Korean Peninsula?

Hon. David Kilgour to Rotary Club of central capital region

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It's a pleasure to join you again. Service clubs are important components of open societies everywhere; your own is one of the most successful in the world, with 34,000 clubs, and 1.2 million members in 200 countries. The Rotary Adventures in Citizenship program, for example, which this club has now conducted for 62 years, and brings about 200 teenagers to Ottawa from across our country yearly is an example of citizenship at its best (I hope anyone who can help with the billeting between April 27-May 1 will volunteer (Campbell Osler at 613 786 2432)).

Koreas Today

This talk is on the complex and vexing subject of North Korea. It has been my privilege to visit South Korea recently in October and last month as well.

How should the world respond to recent events on the Korean Peninsula?

The government of Canada has proclaimed 2013 “The year of Korea in Canada”. So much is going well in South Korea that it appears to be an example of rapid human development for the entire world. Its democracy, including the recent election of Ms. Park Geun-hye as its first woman president, governance in general, strong economy, education—helped by many highly committed parents, the rule of law, social programs, culture, the arts and sports—all seem today to be among the very best internationally. Even the dance “Gangnam Style” attracted more than 787 million YouTube views, the website’s most watched video ever.

Let me offer an instance of the legendary Korean work ethic, not from Samsung, Hyundai or other international brand, but from the service sector. Nam Sang, now in his 80s, operates one of the largest restaurants in Seoul, with seating for 1200 and 120 employees. He began in it at the age of ten at the end of the Korean War, working from 4am until 1am daily for 20 years.

Ban Ki-moon

South Korea’s successes were perhaps recognized by the election and re-election of H.E. Ban Ki-moon as UN Secretary-General. His Excellency noted in his acceptance speech, “My heart is overflowing with gratitude toward my country and people who have sent me here to serve. It has been a long journey from my youth in war torn and destitute Korea to this rostrum and these awesome responsibilities. I could make the journey because the UN was with my people in our darkest days...”

The UN, NATO and the world's democracies must be ready to respond immediately if the North were insanely to invade the South as it did in 1950. If Kim Jong-un and his group in Pyongyang are convinced that outsiders will respond in kind to any large scale violence, they are highly unlikely to risk their survival and privileges.

Prof. Ian Buruma of Bard College, New York, describes the regime as essentially "...a theocracy. Some elements are borrowed from Stalinism and Maoism, but much of the Kim cult owes more to indigenous forms of shamanism: human gods who promise salvation..."

Korea was divided at the 38th parallel at the end of World War II, with the North being administered by Moscow, the South by Washington. Authors Acemoglu and Robinson of *Why Nations Fail* (2012) note that what two generations of Kim family absolutism did to the residents of the so-called People's Republic of Korea includes:

- **living standards by the late 1990's about one-tenth of ones in the South;**
- **life expectancy ten less years than in the South;**
- **recurring famines because of a collapse in agricultural production, and**
- **an educational system, much of which is propaganda intended to shore up the legitimacy of the regime against its self-created foreign enemies, after which students must then spend a full decade in their million-soldier army.**

Buruma notes that the fall of the Soviet Union was a disaster for North Korea when its aid stopped, leaving it almost totally dependent on China. "China", he adds, "could crush North Korea in a day just by cutting off food and fuel".

From the very beginning in South Korea, economic institutions encouraged investment and trade. Its first elected president, Rhee Syngman, and his successor, General Park Chung-hee, were clearly autocratic, but both helped to build an export market economy. Full representative democracy did develop over the decades. The 48 million residents of South Korea today live in one of the world's most successful economies, which recently became its eighth-largest exporter.

Korean War

The three years of the Korean War were a long nightmare, taking the lives of almost three million persons on both sides, including 516 of the 30,000 Canadian soldiers fighting as peacemakers under the UN flag. Many communities were destroyed, in Seoul's case during several seizures and counter ones. Seoul restaurant owner Nam, referred to earlier, told me quite recently that two of his siblings attempted to survive,

but died from eating pine tree needles. There were doubtless myriad similar tragedies.

Earlier until August, 1945 came 35 painful years as a colony of Imperial Japan.

I agree with *Jonathan Manthorpe of the Vancouver Sun* and others that the likelihood of North Korea attacking South Korea is still small despite all the incendiary rhetoric coming from Kim Jong-un since January. He is no doubt seeking to convince North Koreans that he is defending them against aggression from foreign enemies. Without external foes, he lacks any shred of legitimacy. But how many North Koreans, despite decades of similar propagandas from his father and grandfather, can believe that the new U.N. sanctions in response to Kim's mid-February underground test of a nuclear weapon is an act of aggression? Similarly, the joint South Korea-U.S. military exercises have been occurring for years and are hardly acts of war.

Conclusion

The real danger is that the regime will implode, provoking unmanageable regional consequences, possibly including intervention from South Korea. That would greatly trouble Pyongyang's only important remaining ally, China, which wants North Korea to remain a buffer against American military influence in the region and worries about millions of North Koreans refugees flooding into China

Rod Mickleburgh in the *Globe* the other day listed some indicators that Beijing is considering distancing itself from Pyongyang, including, backing the new round of UN economic sanctions. He quoted Earl Drake, a former Canadian ambassador to China, saying that his contacts in Beijing, when North Korea comes up in conversation today, "...sigh and tell me, 'We simply don't know how to deal with them. They're wild men'."

It is of course the unpredictability of the new Kim Jong-un that is so worrisome. Seeking to avoid escalating the tension is no doubt why President Obama has not commented in public on the crisis for the past week, although he has assured South Korea that he would come to its defence. It is troubling that last Friday Kim's government asked foreign countries to consider evacuating diplomats from Pyongyang, telling Britain that it would not be able to guarantee the safety of foreign missions beginning April 10th if conflict erupts. None appears to have moved their staffs. Both Seoul and Washington say they have seen no signs that the regime is preparing for an attack on South Korea.

The world can only hope that sanity in the region will prevail. Thank you.