Policy Forum 04-34B: Threatening Gestures as Cries for Help? Questioning an Overly Fixed Image of North Korea

The NAPSNet Policy Forum provides expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia. As always, we invite your responses to this report and hope you will take the opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis.

Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 04-34B: Threatening Gestures as Cries for Help? Questioning an Overly Fixed Image of North Korea", NAPSNet Policy Forum, September 21, 2004, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/0434b_religionii-html/

0434B_ReligionII.html

Threatening Gestures as Cries for Help? Questioning an Overly Fixed Image of North Korea

PFO 04-34B: September 21, 2004

Threatening Gestures as Cries for Help? Questioning an Overly Fixed Image of North Korea

by Lutz Drescher

CONTENTS

I. Introduction

This is an essay by Lutz Drescher. Drescher, lived as an ecumenical worker in the ROK from 1987 to 1995. Since 2001, he works for the Association of Churches and Missions in Southwest Germany (EMS) as liaison secretary for East Asia. He has participated in numerous meetings with representatives of the North Korean Christian Federation. He coordinated the first official Visit of an EKD (Evangelical Church Germany) delegation to the DPRK in May 2002. The essay states “there is thus freedom of religion, and yet it is a restricted freedom insofar as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is not a democratic country with individual rights of liberty in the Western sense. One can say that the members of the church in North Korea live out their faith under particularly harsh conditions. For precisely this reason, they depend on our intercessions and visits.”

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by Lutz Drescher

“Threatening Gestures as Cries for Help? Questioning an Overly Fixed Image of North Korea”
by Lutz Drescher

In admitting that they had restarted work on a nuclear program, the North Korean government has outraged the global community. Reports in the German media have largely followed the US government's verdict on the isolated country: North Korea is called a "rogue state" and "a hell, cold and dark" (Die Zeit, 2-20 2003). The following essay is an attempt to understand North Korea "from within," against the background of its culture and history. The author does not intend to minimize or dispute the critical analyses of the human rights situation (cf. e.g., www.hrw.org/reports/2002/northkorea/, www.nkhumanrights.or.kr/, www.amnesty.org), nor the views of North Korean refugees with whom he has spoken. Nevertheless, he does wish to present another perspective on North Korea and to draw attention to lesser-known facets of its past and present that are concealed by the prevailing image of the country.]

North Korea is no longer a "blank spot" on the map, to be sure, and yet there is hardly another country for which so little reliable information is available. Is it part of the "axis of evil" and one of the regimes that sponsor terror, as US President George W. Bush claimed in February 2002? Or is it a huge prison as some commentators claim? Or is it an admittedly poor country in which poverty is nevertheless largely distributed equally as many left-wing South Korean students suppose? Why is it that almost every visitor of the country has the feeling of being in a staged reality? What lies behind the almost god-like veneration rendered to the great leader and his son who succeeded him? How can the seemingly irrational actions in relation to the current nuclear crisis be understood? And what role does the church play in this country?

No definitive answers can be given to these questions. Our knowledge of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is incomplete. All that can be said about it remains fragmentary. For an isolated and unknown country such as North Korea, however, attending to the fragmentary is the most honest approach. In this essay I note some of my observations, draw attention to several contradictory positions and pose a number of questions. Above all, however, I attempt to make North Korea understandable in the context of its culture and history: Such reflection is crucial, for it is nearly impossible to do justice to this country without knowledge of the influence of shamanism and Confucianism upon its culture and attention to its historical background.

Impressions of Pyongyang

Landing in Pyongyang and the prospect of border controls elicit mixed feelings. Memories of the difficulties experienced in entering the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany) were still too fresh. We were amazed at the friendly reception we received, and -- at least as a delegation of the German Protestant Church in May 2002 -- our speedy passage through immigration controls, without even one question being asked concerning our luggage.

At first glance, Pyongyang itself seems an astonishingly modern city with newly built districts and numerous skyscrapers. Remains of traditional Korean architecture is difficult to find, since the whole city was reduced to ashes by US bombardment during the Korean War (1950-53). Closer inspection, however, also reveals signs of decay, such as crumbling plaster and countless potholes that are not limited to side streets. Relatively little is known about the life style within the skyscrapers. Germans living in Pyongyang reported major problems with heating during the ice-cold winters, especially on the upper floors.

Striking and clearly visible from every direction is the uncompleted 100-floor hotel that was to become the highest building in Asia. Its construction began shortly before the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, but the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the resulting shortage of cheap energy from the former Soviet Union hindered its completion. How does it affect the people to have lived for more than a decade in the shadow of a building that was planned to be a symbol of majesty, but instead became a monument of economic decline and decay?

Pyongyang's air is clear, clearer than that of Seoul. Economic production has nearly come to a standstill due to a shortage of energy. Only the poorly functioning, coal-driven power station emits yellow clouds of smoke. Resident foreigners and fugitives have both reported that the energy produced there is generally sufficient for Pyongyang itself, but that more distant areas are supplied for only a few hours per day.

Many visitors are shown the Pyongyang Maternity Hospital, which is a good hospital with fairly modern equipment. The scene there does not correspond well with the images and reports of the almost primitive conditions that can be found in rural hospitals. The suspicion arises that it is more a hospital for the party and military elite than for the simple people. In view of the inequity of the distribution of health care and energy, the myth of "equally distributed poverty" takes a beating.

Staged Reality

What visitors are permitted to see -- in the Maternity Hospital and elsewhere -- is almost like a play, a staged production that only reflects a small part of reality. This is not a completely foreign concept, however. Every culture feels the need to show visitors its best side, and this is particularly widespread in Eastern Asia. Similar phenomena have also been seen in South Korea. During the economic dictatorship under Park Chung Hee (1961-1979), villages alongside the highways were model villages with attractive, self-contained houses that were hardly comparable to the simple huts that could be seen on a detour to the countryside. In 1988, shortly before the Olympic Games, the view from the highway to a poor quarter was blocked by a wooden fence. The roofs of another poor quarter were painted colorfully in order to give a romantic impression. Staged reality both here and there.

Here we find ourselves in the midst of cultural contexts, the knowledge of which is essential to an understanding of North Korean reality. In the culture of East Asia, it is of great importance to "save

one's face", to be conscious of one's honor. The Chinese characters behind this expression, however, point in an additional direction: "choimyon" has something to do with self-presentation. It literally means to keep the outward side of the body intact. Or to put it more tritely: "the façade must be correct". It is because of this choimyon that Koreans take very good care of their clothes. It is also because of choimyon that the North Korean government attributes their need for emergency assistance to flood and drought catastrophes, i.e., natural events. Confessing the failure of the economic system would lead to a loss of face.

Confucian Heritage

Although the socialist world-view has prevailed in North Korea for more than 50 years, there are still traces of the century-long influence of Confucian thinking and structures as well as shamanistic emotionality. In the South at least, one can clearly discern such traces in families, firms, politics, the economy, and even in the churches.(1) It may be assumed that the strong hierarchies anchored in Confucian thinking can also be found in the North: in the party, the military and the producer's cooperatives.

It is a central Confucian value that families stick together. The emotional scenes that may be seen at every family reunification provide an eloquent witness to this fact. The father is the head of the family, and after his death, his eldest son takes his place. If a communist dynasty seems very strange to Westerners, in the context of Confucian thought it is completely reasonable that even in politics the son may succeed his father. Moreover, it is all the more understandable, since president Kim Il Sung, who died in 1994, presented himself as the father of the entire country, and his mythologically exaggerated family history has remained a central theme in the collective’s early childhood education. With respect to modes of succession, one can find parallels in the South as well. Among Protestant churches in South Korea, there is ongoing discussion concerning the fact that sons have succeeded their fathers in some of the large and wealthy churches. They rule over their congregations as though they were small kingdoms.

There is another phenomenon in North Korea. At the death of former President Kim Il Sung, tens of thousands of people literally burst into tears. There are, of course, many societies that exhibit phenomena bordering on mass hysteria. Nevertheless, there is reason to suppose that an old cultural-religious pattern is also active here. Korea as a whole, but especially North Korea, was powerfully influenced for centuries by shamanism. In shamanism, emotions play a major role. It is part of the ceremony that people shed tears and become entranced.

According to old reports, people in the North were particularly religious. It is possible that a part of this religiosity was channeled into veneration of the leader Kim Il Sung. His history already adorned by legends during his lifetime, he receives almost god-like veneration. This concept too is not foreign to shamanism. A whole series of great historical generals, those who distinguished themselves in defense of their country, joined the Pantheon of the gods and spirits, and continue to play a role in shamanistic rituals to this day.

At many places in Pyongyang -- especially on public buildings -- long red banners can be seen, sporting various slogans related to the party and the military. On some of these (and also, for example, on the so-called "eternity tower") one can read these words: "The great leader, comrade Kim Il Sung, will live with us eternally." This almost blasphemous-sounding message needs to be contextualized in its cultural-religious setting. The veneration of ancestors plays a major role in both Confucian and shamanistic traditions. In East Asia the dead are more alive than in the West. In both North and South Korea people gather at gravesites on special family memorial days, and especially

at the traditional fall feast (Chusok), in order to hold ceremonies "in the presence of the ancestors".

The Making of a Conflict

There are many myths surrounding the life of Kim Il Sung. Nevertheless, the central reason for his veneration is his commitment to the liberation of Korea from Japanese hegemony.

The Korean peninsula has always been of great geo-strategic importance. It is the "dagger aimed at the heart of Japan" and the bridge to China. In the course of history it has experienced many invasions, while the Korean people have never conducted a war of expansion.(2) From 1905 to 1945 Korea was a colony of Japan. At this time, attempts at liberation were brutally crushed. When Japan capitulated after atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 15, 1945, the Japanese troops in the North of the 38th degree of latitude were disarmed by the Soviets, their troops in the South by the Americans. From the beginning, a different political strategy was pursued in the two "liberated" (and at the same time "occupied") zones. This is one of the main reasons for the division of the country. Whereas in the North it was communist rebels, generally held in high esteem by the people (Kim Il Sung among them), who came to power, in the South it was right-wing conservatives (and before long also circles infiltrated by collaborators) who came to power, with the support of the USA.

The Korean War (1950-1953) resulted, in part, from the mounting opposition between East and West. Its traumatic consequences continue to overshadow the lives of the people in both parts of Korea. Up until the beginning of the 90's, there was intensive debate among historians concerning the background of the war and who began it. Since the opening of archives in the former Soviet Union, it can be shown that the troops of the North crossed the border into the South on June 25, 1950. At the same time, more details are also becoming known about conditions akin to a civil war in the South after 1945. Examples are the riot in October 1946 in Masan, in which 6,000 people died, and the bombardment of the island Jejudo, in which nearly 30,000 people (a tenth of the population) were killed. During the Korean War United Nations troops fought on the side of the South, volunteer troops from China on the side of the North. About 3.5 million people fell victim to the war. Broad parts of North Korea were reduced to ashes. The war was ended in July 1953 by a cease-fire agreement, ratified by North Korea and the United States, and valid to this day. As a result of the Korean War dictators arose on both sides of the demilitarized zone. In the South, they were not really overcome until 1992. To the present day, the highest concentration of troops in the world is found on the Korean peninsula. Nearly 1.7 million soldiers face each other across the border.

Since the Korean War, up to 40,000 US-American soldiers are stationed in the South. The USA emphasizes that the troops are there to protect democracy and freedom. But the fact that US-American policy has provided little opposition to the rotating dictatorships in the South nourishes the suspicion that geo-strategic considerations also played a role. Moreover, while the North Korean army has more soldiers than the South (ca. 1 million against 650,000), the South Korean military is much better equipped. Thus, South Korea has probably been in the position to defend itself for some time.

Whatever may be the reason for the stationing of US-American troops in South Korea, their presence is felt as a threat in the North. Whereas the Clinton administration made some careful, preliminary steps of rapprochement, this feeling of threat has increased again since the assumption of office by President George Bush and his verdict that North Korea belongs to the axis of evil. In the fall of 2002, North Korea made the surprising announcement that it was working on a nuclear programme, and has subsequently irritated world opinion with ever escalating gestures of threat. What lies

behind these threats?

Threatening Gestures and Cries for Help

Several factors play a role here. Already in May 2002, it was obvious that the slogans on many of the large red banners on public buildings were about holding together and "enduring". Even the North Korean government knows that the strength of the people is being devoured by the economic crisis that has the country in its grip. During an October 2003 meeting in Seoul, refugees reported signs of dissolution that extended even into military and party circles. The offensive rhetoric and invocation of the aggressive aims of the USA are meant to shore up a crumbling internal unity. North Korea is also afraid of being "overlooked" and forgotten by the world public. With such rhetoric it places itself back on the scene and makes headlines.

North Korea clearly has two aims in mind. First, it seeks a non-aggression pact and thus security in relation to the USA, which it perceives as a threat. The nuclear program gives the illusion of power and is also employed as a means of negotiation -- a strategy that was often successful in the past. Secondly, it hopes to obtain a greater degree of economic cooperation, not limited to the delivery of energy and food. This signals a radical political change. Whereas in the past the “Juche” idea of independent and self-reliant development was the policy standard, it appears that at least in the economic sphere, one is now prepared to pursue a different path. All the same, they still wish to "save face" -- they find it impossible to admit that their own policy led to a dead end. The North Korean nation is on the verge of ruin. It has nothing to lose. Cries for help lie hidden behind their threats.

It is an irony of history that South Korea is the strongest ally in this situation, for nobody there has an interest in the total breakdown of the North Korean regime. Such a breakdown would have numerous consequences that South Korea would not be able to master, such as a flood of refugees. For this reason, unimpressed by the tensions, talks between the North and South continue to take place on multiple levels. Their intensity increased after Roh Moo-Hyun won the presidency in the South. He has promised to continue the Sunshine Policy of his predecessor. He exhibits self-confidence in his relation to the USA, and has decisively opposed all plans of attack.(3)

North Korea is on the way to greater openness, a development that visitors from the South have also confirmed. One can only hope that neither the North Koreans nor others will slam the doors shut. There is no doubt that US-American policy will continue to have a great impact on the relationship between the two Koreas. It remains uncertain, however, whether steps toward a further opening of North Korea will also be taken from this side. Neither trade embargos and isolation nor self-chosen seclusion are viable options for the future.

Religious Freedom and the Church

Unrestricted religious freedom does not exist in North Korea. There is no doubt that the activities of Christians are closely supervised, just as the society as a whole is characterized by a high degree of control. For this reason, the existence of an underground church -- as reported from time to time by analogy to the Chinese situation -- is improbable. The two churches belonging to the Korean Christian Federation (KCF), the Roman Catholic “cathedral” and the 500 house churches are presumably the only places in which people read the Bible, pray and sing hymns. When we asked the participants of a house church service what Christian faith meant to them, they answered that faith helped them to better serve their country and people -- an answer that is very similar to what one

can hear in China.

From time to time Christian circles in South Korea dispute the existence of Christians in the North, claiming that to be "real" Christians, they would have to be in opposition to the regime. This opinion, however, overlooks the fact that the 12,000 Christians in North Korea are only a small minority with little influence in a country of more than 20 million people. Nor can it be ignored that many of those who express this opinion were themselves quite willing to compromise with the alternating South Korean dictators of the past.

Shortly before his death, former president Kim Il-Sung spoke of his mother being a member of the Methodist church and how he had sometimes visited the children's service. In this way, the practice of religion was acknowledged to a certain degree by the highest authorities. There is no fundamental antagonism between the nation and Christianity, though it is expected that the members of the church will serve their country and people. There is thus freedom of religion, and yet it is a restricted freedom insofar as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is not a democratic country with individual rights of liberty in the Western sense. One can say that the members of the church in North Korea live out their faith under particularly harsh conditions. For precisely this reason, they depend on our intercessions and visits.

The present chairman of the North Korean Christian Federation is Rev. Kang Yong Sop, a relative of the mother of Kim Il Sung. When most Christians fled to the South in 1945, his father remained, and to some extent held high offices. Pastor Kang also had a career as diplomat. He was an ambassador in Malta and Romania, and representative chairman of the highest court. From this information one can draw valuable conclusions concerning the role and function of the KCF. Certainly it is not independent. It functions as one of the channels through which the North Korean government operates diplomatically. On the other hand, it is also a channel in reverse. Many outside churches gain entrance to North Korea via the KCF. Invitations from representatives of the Korean Christian Federation and travel to North Korea are a small contribution to the opening of the isolated country. As for Pastor Kang's self-understanding, this was his answer to the question whether he saw himself more as a diplomat or a pastor: "I come from a Christian family".

A Country in which People Live

North Korea is no "blank spot" on the map, but a country in which people live with their desires and hopes, with their fears and worries. It is a country that finds itself in the midst of a crisis, and a process of transformation. The task of the international community is to help this transformation move in the right direction.

ENDNOTES

(1) Cf. A survey concerning the churches: L. Drescher, “Ethik und Ekstase - Beobachtungen über den Einfluss von Konfuzianismus und Schamanismus auf die koreanischen Kirchen,” in: Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft, Münster, 78 (1994) 4, pp. 274-289. (2) Cf. L. Drescher, “Geschichtliche Schuld und Wirtschaftsdiktatur - Versöhnung im geteilten Korea,” in: U. Duchrow (Hg.): Wahrheit, Versöhnung und Neuanfang auch im Westen -- oder nur im Süden und Osten? Bremen 1997, Sonderdruck der Jungen Kirche, pp. 18-31. (3) About his "North policy" following the example of Willy Brandt's "East policy" he gives abundant information in: Roh Moo Hyun, Frieden und Prosperität in Nordostasien, ed. by Presse und Kulturabteilung der Botschaft der Republik Korea 2003.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)
Web:
Return to top
back to top

View this online at: https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/0434b_religionii-html/

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org