

"The Northeast Asian Arc of Crisis"

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September 16, Tokyo. It was a hot day near the border between North and South Korea. Hundreds of us stood on both sides of an ice wall that towered over our heads. We held pick axes and hammers, and we waited for the signal to begin. It was August 15, 1999: the fifty-fourth anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japanese colonialism. Behind us, along the road from the border to the capital Seoul, stretched thousands of South Koreans, part of a "human belt" organized by groups working for the re-unification of the two countries. In front of us, four miles away, was the "demilitarized zone" (DMZ), one of the world's most dangerous flash points. And beyond that lay North Korea, a land that few outsiders have visited.

When the signal came, we began to let fly at the wall which had been built earlier that afternoon by unification activists. We were soon covered in a shower of glittering ice chips. Dozens of photographers crouched near us to capture the event. Within minutes, whole blocks of ice tumbled to our feet. When the wall was no higher than our knees, we reached across to clasp hands with our colleagues on the other side. It was a powerful moment.

But ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we were still making do with symbolic acts.

We were a diverse group of peace activists from Europe, Asia, and the United States, and we'd come to South Korea to stand in solidarity with Korean activists, build international links, and demonstrate our commitment to ending the Cold War in Asia. Because, while Europe celebrates



Both photos this page: Joseph Gerson

the end of the Cold War (and mourns the post-Cold War tragedies in Chechnya, Bosnia, and Kosovo), Northeast Asia remains locked in the ideological struggles of the past. The starkest reminder of this time lapse is the Korean peninsula where huge armies face each other across the 38th parallel and both countries are spending huge sums on the latest military technology.

The Korean peninsula is not the only remaining battleground of the Cold War. Further south, China and Taiwan have yet to resolve their fifty-year-old stand-off. This war of words and gestures intensified this summer when Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui suggested that the two Chinas are separate states rather than one country-two systems as Beijing maintains. Elsewhere in the region, problems left over from World War II remain intractable. Japan and Russia are still squabbling over the Kurile islands, and many civic groups in the region continue to call on Japan to apologize and pay reparations for war crimes (against the "comfort women," slave laborers, residents of Nanking).

Three key factors aggravate these many conflicts. An enormous number of weapons is flowing into the region: in 1997, Asia as a whole imported about \$12 billion of weapons, nearly half the world's total imports. Even as they continue to buy bushels of arms, the countries of Northeast Asia have suffered a series of economic setbacks. The Asian financial crisis hit South Korea hard, Japan has been mired in a decade-long recession, China's astonishing economic growth has tapered off, and the Russian and North Korean economies have nearly collapsed.

The last of these factors—but certainly not the least—is the role played by the United States. According to the conventional wisdom of US security specialists, Northeast Asia remains peaceful only because of the US military presence. According to this "peace through hegemony" argument—which has been the US government position since the end of World War II—US troops, bases, and the 7th fleet act as a buffer separating the conflict-disposed countries of the region. Without the US military, China would invade Taiwan, the



Korean peninsula would be engulfed in war, and a growing Japanese military would threaten other countries in the region. Although the US has vacillated on specific policies over the years—engaging China then containing it, withdrawing from Philippine bases then pushing through the recent Visiting Forces Agreement, going back and forth on troop reductions on the Korean peninsula—the core of US strategy remains the same. From the US government's perspective, the US is a Pacific power, key areas in Asia fall within the realm of US "national interest," and the US military must play a constabulary role in the region to prevent war.

Today, peace activists in the region are trying to overturn this logic of "peace through hegemony." They are attempting to block the flow of arms into the region and replace a system of US bases with a multilateral security structure. They are trying to break down walls and build bridges in their place. And for many, the obvious place to begin is the Korean peninsula. Recent news of a breakthrough in US-North Korean relations emphasizes this point.

The centrality of North Korea

At the moment, North Korea is the focus of international attention. The US, Japanese, and South Korean governments rarely agree on much, but they all believe that North Korea is a threat to regional security. How has such a small country become the security preoccupation of such important powers?

At first glance, North Korea doesn't seem like much of a threat. With the collapse of communism, it has few allies. It is experiencing a serious food crisis that is

only part of a much larger economic problem—factories aren't working for lack of fuel, few international companies want to invest in North Korea, and few countries are interested in the products that North Korea exports. It is a poor country, but a proud one, with its history of defying Japanese colonialism, Soviet and Chinese domination, and US threats and incursion. Even the high-profile acts of terrorism—the assassination attempt on the South Korean president in 1974, the Rangoon bombing of 1983—are things of the past. In the 1990s, North Korea tried to make the best of a bad situation. It tried to at-

tract foreign business to its free-trade zone. It patched up its relations with post-Soviet Russia. It made overtures to Japan, South Korea, and the US. But it has also learned the key lesson of deterrence.

To avoid being bombed like Iraq and Yugoslavia or invaded like Panama, North Korea has used a mixture of research and bluster to maintain itself as a "threat." Instead of developing nuclear weapons secretly like South Africa or Israel, North Korea practically advertised its expanded nuclear research program. This risky gambit led to the showdown of 1993-94, when the US considered a pre-emptive strike on North Korea and only the last-minute deal struck by former President Jimmy Carter and North Korean president Kim Il Sung averted the crisis.

This deal, which became the Agreed Framework of 1994, froze North Korea's nuclear program in exchange for fuel, two light-water nuclear power plants, and the US promise to start lifting economic sanctions. In the last couple years, the Agreed Framework has come under renewed pressures, as both sides have traded accusations of non-compliance. With its nuclear research program frozen, North Korea did the next best thing to attract world attention—it launched a rocket in August 1998 and prepared to test its long-range missile capacity in August 1999. In response, the US Congress threatened to cut off food aid and further isolate the country.

Perhaps the most serious repercussions of the US-North Korean confrontation have been felt in Japan. Although both China and Russia have nuclear missiles capable of striking Japan, the launch of the North Korean rocket in August 1998 stirred up the security debate in Japan and the changes have come fast and furious. Japan is now pouring money into a regional "Star Wars" called Theater Missile Defense, a joint program with the US, ostensibly to protect against future North Korean missiles. Japan has also changed the status of the Self Defense Forces so that

they can play a more active role in preparations for regional war. In March 1999, the SDF engaged in its first military skirmish when it fired on two boats suspected of being North Korean, which had intruded on Japanese waters. On the domestic front, new legislation allows wire-tapping, and the *Hinomaru* and *Kimigayo*—the national flag and national anthem that evoke the old empire—have been officially reinstated.

This is not, as some US journalists have declared, a new wave of Japanese nationalism. Rather, conservative politicians have used the North Korean "threat" to sway public opinion and pass legislation that they've been working toward for years. Japanese conservatives are imprisoned in bipolar thinking. They debate the virtues of an independent military versus continued dependence on the US. The alternative of building a regional security institution is not even on the agenda for the majority of Japanese politicians.

Of the various changes, the Theater Missile Defense (TMD) may have the most lasting impact. TMD draws a line through Northeast Asia just as the Iron Curtain once divided Europe. The US is using TMD, though it is mostly in the



The Northeast Asian Arc of Crisis, from *Pacific Defense*, Kent E. Calder, William Morrow, New York, 1996

Recent US-NK relations

In recent negotiations in Berlin in September, the United States and North Korea have taken another step toward détente. North Korea has agreed, at least for the time being, to freeze its development of long-range missiles. And the United States has agreed to lift some of the economic sanctions that have been imposed on North Korea for nearly fifty years.

Until recently there have been at least two different US policies toward North Korea. Portions of the Clinton administration favored a policy of engaging North Korea. The Pentagon and quite a few members of Congress preferred an all-stick and no-carrot approach. The agreement in Berlin indicates that at least for the time being, the pro-engagement forces have the upper hand. The lifting of the US sanctions, while it does not represent a significant economic boost for North Korea, may encourage Japan to normalize relations with Pyongyang—which would mean several billion dollars in compensation for World War II damages.

While news of a warming in US-North Korean relations is certainly welcome, peace has not suddenly broken out in Northeast Asia. The array of military power in the region remains untouched, and programs such as TMD are still on track. However, if both the US and North Korea view the Berlin agreement as a starting point rather than an ending point, we've just witnessed a large chip taken out of Asia's Cold War wall of ice.

—John Feffer, 9/19/99

research stage, as a way of distinguishing "rogue" powers such as North Korea and China (and even, on occasion, Russia) from the countries that need to be protected such as Japan and South Korea (and possibly Taiwan). TMD will spur the arms race in the region, as countries build more weapons to overwhelm the putative umbrella. It infuriates both China (because of the possible inclusion of Taiwan) and Russia (because it violates the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972). And by dividing the "roguish" from the "responsible," TMD also runs right through any attempts to build a multilateral security framework in the region.

Signs of hope

From the DMZ to the TMD, the Cold War seems unfortunately alive and well in Northeast Asia. Conventional thinking—and conventional weapons—are the mainstay of the geopolitical debate in this region. Still, there are glimmers of hope.

- North Korea is not the irrational "rogue" portrayed in the US press. Rather, North Korea is very pragmatically pursuing the best possible economic and diplomatic deal. Based on a realpolitik understanding that the US is the most powerful actor in the region and that other countries will follow the US lead, North Korea apparently sees its best chance in direct negotiations with the United States. These negotiations may well produce a stronger Agreed Framework, with the US beginning to lift sanctions against North Korea and North Korea restricting its missile ambitions. A détente in US-North Korean relations can serve the same function for Northeast Asia as the US-Soviet détente did for Europe in the 1970s—create a space for regional alternatives to grow.

- North Korean-South Korean relations are their best in decades. True, the two countries are still locking horns rhetorically and even militarily (as in the Yellow Sea naval confrontation this past July). But over 100,000 South Koreans have visited Mt. Kumkang in the North as part of Hyundai's tourism project. The Korean Energy Development Organization's light-water reaction construction project in the North (part of the Agreed Framework) is bringing together workers from North and South. And various civic exchanges are

taking place, largely because of South Korean president Kim Dae Jung's loosening of restrictions on dealings with the North.

- Japan's recent upsurge in militarism is not irreversible. If North Korea becomes less of a threat in the eyes of the Japanese government (and the Japanese public) and talks on political normalization begin again, Japanese conservatives may be less successful in their attempts to overturn their country's five-decade-strong commitment to pacifism.

- China, despite its position on Taiwan, can play a constructive role as peacemaker in the region. China does not want TMD nor is it comfortable with Japan's new muscle-flexing. The Chinese leadership does not want North Korea to serve as an easy justification for heightened tensions in the region. China has received praise for its role in the Four Party Talks (to bring an end at long last to the Korean War) and its actions during the Asian financial crisis (by not devaluing its currency). While China hasn't demonstrated any particular fondness for multilateral security structures, it may by discrete actions do a great deal to create the conditions for regional cooperation.

The division of the Korean peninsula and the lines drawn through all of Northeast Asia will not be erased overnight, nor will a few hammers and ice picks do the trick. The Berlin Wall, too, did not collapse all of the sudden: for decades, activists and government officials chipped away at this edifice. In Northeast Asia, similar patience and perseverance will eventually put an end to a Cold War that has more than overstayed its welcome. ☪

LINKING ARMS: Asia-Europe Cooperation on Alternative Security Strategies

Report of a series of workshops at the Hague Appeal for Peace in May 1999 which focused on the role of the US military in both Europe and Asia, the arms trade, the need for multilateral security structures, and how activists in Europe and Asia might cooperate in addressing these issues. The 62-page booklet is available for \$1.00 from Asia Programs, International Division, AFSC, 1501 Cherry St., Philadelphia PA 19102. It is also accessible on the Web at www.afsc.org/asia/linkarms.htm.

Threnody

It is not approaching.
It has arrived.
We are not circumventing it.
It is happening.
It is happening now.
We are not preventing it.
We are within it.

—Denise Levertov

**In Memoriam:
Dom Helder Câmara**

Archbishop Helder Câmara, an early advocate of liberation theology and solidarity with the poor, died Friday September 27 at age 90. Born in Fortaleza, Brazil, Câmara served as auxiliary bishop of Rio de Janeiro and archbishop of Recife and Olinda, in the northeast of Brazil. In 1968, he led a meeting of Latin American bishops to produce documents calling for the church to stand in solidarity with the poor rather than the military and land-owning elite.

He presided from a simple wooden chair rather than the bishop's traditional gilded throne, and lived in a simple room rather than the palatial office residence. Under his direction, thousands of peasants met in Bible study groups and studied the Gospel as a blueprint for social change.

Archbishop Câmara advocated the dropping of such titles as "eminence" and "excellency" among the clergy and sought to change the role of the bishop as "Bishop-Prince, residing in a palace, isolated from his clergy." When denounced as "Fidel Castro in a cassock," he responded "When I fed the poor, they called me a saint; when I asked 'Why are they poor?' they called me a Communist."

In the 1980s, he criticized the role of multinational corporations, industrialized nations in the undeveloped world, and communist powers for imposing their will on smaller countries.

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