

LETTER FROM SEOUL “MEMORY AND HOPE”

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*The following commentary summarizes thoughts and observations
from a February 2019 visit by the authors to Seoul, Korea.*

The opinions expressed in this and all LISD commentaries are those of the authors.

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

It is clear to all that the aspiration to unify North and South Korea is a very unique case of “positive self-determination” in our world, while simultaneously being one of the most complex ones, which involves nuclear weapons, and the direct interest of at least five major powers including neighboring China, Russia and Japan, the United States and the European Union). Thus, their incisive focus on the peninsula and the outcome of recent developments will likely result in global consequences. In this context, there is a powerful reality of a *de facto* complete separation of North Korea and the Republic of South Korea along the 38th perimeter and consequently South Korea being akin to an island. South Korea can only be reached by plane or ship, or as one young Korean said, by “rowing or swimming.” Neither road nor rail connect the world’s eleventh largest economy to the North nor further on to China, Russia, and EurAsia. Hence, it is vital to seriously consider new ideas to continue the existing connection between the south eastern Busan in the Republic of Korea to Seoul further on north to and across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) into North Korea and China and further on west by the Trans-Siberian Railroad towards Europe.

Behind the booming economic activities of today are the still very powerful elements of the past, both within the complex and strict Korean society and the remembrance of wars past—including periods of Japanese domination, the War in the 1940s, and the intra-Korean war after Chinese aggression in the 1950s. Surprisingly, the adoration and fascination with the art, culture, and values of Europe spans across generations. There seems to be a deep fascination with Austrian culture from Klimt to Mozart, Schubert and Strauss, Jr., and one is struck by the reminiscence with Switzerland, which can be found in a similarly strong national identity and will to defend; in the highly organized advanced life in sometimes tight living conditions due to the topography (with the key difference of access to the sea); also in the effective and superbly organized infrastructure in a complex mountainous and coastal setting; and even in the architecture of old roof constructions.

We were particularly impressed by the expressed hope and aspiration of a normalization of the intra-Korean relationship, which could potentially result in a declaration of the end of the war of 1950, an opening of rail connections, some economic activities, and perhaps a bit of tourism—albeit gradually.

A WILSONIAN LEGACY 1919-2019

On March 1, 1919, thousands of people demonstrated in Seoul and other Korean cities against Japan's repressive colonial rule. Members of all classes, ages and religious denominations demanded Korea's right to self-determination. But Japan suppressed the Samil movement and continued to rule continuingly until 1945.

During the March 1 uprising, Japan and its Western allies were meeting in Paris to negotiate the treaties meant to bring peace after the Great War of 1914-1918. A stable American-Japanese cooperation was regarded as an essential element of the new international order and the proposed League of Nations. Already on August 8, 1918, William Sharp, the American Ambassador to France, had written to President Woodrow Wilson: "Indeed, I consider the new Entente established between the United States and Japan as a triumph for our diplomacy and of far reaching effect."

A century later, on a Saturday afternoon in late February 2019, days before the second summit between President Donald Trump and North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un, hundreds of angry and emotional activists filled the street close to the Japanese embassy in Seoul. They demanded compensation for Korean girls and women who had to serve Japanese troops as "comfort women" during World War II. Two days later, a former Korean prime minister and highly respected statesman expressed to us his deep concern about South Korea's current political relations with Japan. An eminent historian of Korea's cultural heritage referred to the traumata of elderly Koreans: the colonial rule, the surprising exclusion of Korea from the U.S. security perimeter in Dean Acheson's speech to the National Press Club in January 1950, and the ensuing bloody and destructive Korean War. He emphasized the hope that the United States should stay in South Korea for at least another 25 years.

Today, North and South Korea are *de jure* still at war with each other, and there exists no peace treaty between North Korea and the United States. The Republic of Korea, the southern part of the Korean peninsula, is *de facto* an island, separated from the rest of Eurasia by iron fortifications. The DMZ cuts any roads or train links to the North. South Korea's more than 51 million inhabitants, living on 38,700 square miles between steep mountains, are connected to the world by plane, ship, or the internet only.¹ Without Incheon Airport, the Busan harbor, and cyber-interactive global connections, the world's eleventh largest economy could not flourish in the 21st century.

Apparently, all Koreans, regardless whether they are in favor of reunification or not, do feel like *one people*. The South believes the North is separated and lives under an authoritarian regime, and new initiatives should eventually lead to a softening of the border, thus opening possible long-term perspectives of reunification. The North with its 22 million inhabitants and direct links to Eurasia sees the South as foreign dominated and influenced. In North Korean eyes, the United States in 1945 simply replaced the Japanese.

¹ Somewhat reminiscent of mountainous and highly organized Switzerland, South Korea, is more than twice the size of Switzerland's roughly 16,000 square miles, is home to about 51 million inhabitants (nearly 6 times the Swiss' now 9 million) and does feel like an island without any land road or rail connection to the north.

BETWEEN GREAT POWERS

Today, all Korean strategic issues remain closely in focus with the geopolitical interests of the world's powers. Like in the late 19th or early 20th century, any analysis of political events on the Korean peninsula must include potential conjunctions with its neighbors China and Russia, Japan, as well as the United States, and—at least in the economic and cultural field—the European Union. The interests of these powers vis-à-vis Korea—North and South—are diverse and multifaceted. However, this situation also introduces a plethora of multiple bilateral relations between those interested powers, which reflect on the situation and its development of the Korean Peninsula. In this, possible de-nuclearization is certainly an essential, but not the only element that will shape the future of Korea and the region.

In today's northeast Asia, great power interests seem to be as relevant as in the late 19th century. The United States is perceived by some Koreans as withdrawing, while others refer to the new U.S. base at Pyongtaek, south of Seoul, as one of the world's most sophisticated military installations, with its geostrategic location directly vis-à-vis China's Shantung Peninsula across the Yellow Sea.

Russia would like to extend its gas pipelines towards energy hungry South Korea. Russia would also like to enhance the rail links with its Trans-Siberian Rail system. China, the rising power of Eurasia and the world, not only implements a *mare nostrum* strategy in the South China Sea but also has become South Korea's largest foreign market, thus inducing the country at least economically in its emerging Sino-centric system. Arguably Korea is today perhaps the only region in the world where such a concentration of multiple great power interests interacts so intensely.

Of course, Koreans realize that the convergence of influences from the outside and sometimes rivaling foreign perspectives are not always congruent with Korean interests. They try to live with such a complex political situation and to make the best use of every opportunity offered by the various and often conflicting great power interests. They carefully follow their respective bilateral or multilateral interactions, be it the development of the Russian-Chinese relationship, the Japanese-U.S. alliance or the ramifications of Russian-U.S. relations. Koreans know that the dynamics within this conglomerate of multiple bilateral relations directly affect their own situation.

HOPE AND OPPORTUNITY

Not only in Seoul's Blue House—the home of the President of the Republic of Korea and equivalent to Washington's White House—the Hanoi meeting between North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and U.S. President Donald Trump was anticipated with hope and expectations. Since 2000 there have so far been five inter-Korean summits—personal meetings between the leaders of North and South Korea. President Moon Jae-in, who has met Kim Jung-un three times since 2018, wants to continue this tradition.

Since some time, both Koreas have been pushing for an end-of-war declaration. But the United States has so far refused, viewing it as a concession to North Korea's leadership. As a result, on February 22, 2019, Pyongyang turned down South Korea's offer to hold joint events celebrating the centennial of the March 1 Independence Movement of 1919.

In spite of the perceived failure of the recent Hanoi meeting between the United States and North Korea, South Koreans don't give up hope. Their economically successful country is a respected member of the G20. With its globally successful “chaebols,” huge family owned

corporations like Samsung or Hyundai, South Korea's economy is 40 times the economy north of the DMZ. The current South Korean presidential administration has offered to Pyongyang a "new beginning" with three core elements: opening of a rail connection between North and South Korea and modernization of North Korea's rail road system, development of the tourist industry in North Korea, and revitalization of the Kaesong industrial complex north of the DMZ.

People in Seoul have dreams. They want to connect the peninsula with high speed trains to the rest of Eurasia, combine the high technology of the South with the cheap labor of the North, and use its mountains and coastlines as the ideal tourist destination for South Korea's overpopulated metropolitan areas. At the same time, Koreans have an excellent memory. They remember the promise of self-determination made by President Woodrow Wilson 100 years ago. They know that South Korea's first president, Lee Syng-man, graduated from Princeton University. And as realists they realize only too well the relevance of relationship with the great powers for Korea's future – much as in the past, but there seems to be one important difference to the situation that existed at the end of the 19th century, when Korea was weak politically, economically, and militarily. A leading representative of Korea's younger generation made the point: "In comparison to March 1919 we are much stronger today." And, perception does form reality.