

*Crisis in Korea. America, China and the Risk of War*, Tim Beal, Pluto Press 2011.

Book launch comments of Roderic Alley November 24 2011.

When approached to launch this book here was an invitation that I accepted with alacrity. Over many years now, Tim has investigated the Korean situation through numerous visits to both sides of that divided country and through his assiduous compilation of data, reports, recorded conversations, and secondary resources. Although I am not a Northeast Asia area specialist, I have maintained a strong interest in this troubled location that go back to vivid memories of the outbreak of the war in 1950 and what would then follow, including Truman's spectacular sacking of MacArthur a year later. Time magazine even ran a cartoon showing an irate republican denouncing Truman with the words: "Who does he think he is: President?"

Those memories retain their pertinence since, like other divisions of the Cold War in Germany and Vietnam, the Korean fracture goes on retaining its global significance. Despite some popular mythology, the Korean conflict that began in 1950 is in no sense a forgotten war. Going back further, what has happened on the peninsula in the last 100 years continues to echo. Those holding power but who lack a history of these events arouse consternation – and this includes too many American policy makers. But walls to a better understanding of North Korea go beyond historical amnesia and are varied. They include linguistic barriers; ideological divisions that distort interpretations of what is occurring in that country; perceptual constructs that screen out important information; reluctance to acquire a deeper comprehension of the North Korea mindset; and deliberate misrepresentation for political or for policy convenience.

Viewing contemporary social and economic conditions, the politics on either side of the divide in Korea retain their edginess which, in turn, can upset relations on either side of that divide with, respectively, Japan, the United States, China and Russia. Given these complexities a major challenge obviously confronts the analyst attempting to explain what is occurring, why it is doing so, and the

motives driving those who are shaping Korean events.

At the outset, it deserves note that this study is not unsympathetic to the regime in Pyongyang. Accordingly reviewers may contest what is in this study but, should they do so, then I believe that reaction is positive to the extent that it will foster a badly needed debate about the DPRK's actual internal conditions, as well as the international community's responsibilities for contributing to the settlement, if not resolution of long standing divisions and differences afflicting the people of Korea.

This book locates the Korean situation in its appropriate historical setting: the colonial legacy, the huge impact of both the 1950-53 war and its Cold War *leitmotiv*, and subsequent prolongation of territorial division. Often noted in the book is the huge impact that the collapse of the Soviet Union had upon North Korea.

Against this background it is argued, I believe convincingly, that the division has continued to serve the purposes of continued United States militarisation. SIPRI data is quoted – considering the top 21 countries in terms of military expenditure, the US and its allies now account for some 75% of total military expenditure. From that we can gauge the importance to the Americans of the alliance with South Korea and Japan, not to mention its military links with Taiwan. What this has done is contribute to the overall tension and instability that persists in North East Asia – a region that continues to lack a convincing regional structure of political cooperation and dispute settlement. Along with the Middle East, North East Asia is what we may call an insecurity complex.

First Vietnam and then Germany, but how long before this final and elemental Cold War division is settled? Well, going by this study – don't hold your breath, indeed any sudden transition could prove highly destabilising. Anticipation of the collapse of the regime in the North has diminished the incentives for negotiating a peace. Conditions of neither war nor peace – that Cold War throwback- are seen here as probable. While overt or outright conflict is considered unlikely, the

book warns that we cannot rule out a major conflict by accident or miscalculation. Or, for that matter, the negative impact of a serious deterioration in Sino-American relations. The Korean issue is obviously fraught not just across the immediate border, but for its undoubted capacity to worsen relations between Japan and China or between China and the United States. This, then, remains a hair trigger location.

This puts a great responsibility on South Korea and where there is enough in this study to suggest that, although muted at present, it contains a sufficient variety of interests looking to a phased process of tension reduction leading to what could be a slow, lengthy process of functional collaboration and cooperation. That will require vision, patience and a gradual loosening of the United States military connection to operate to effect. As is pointed out, many South Koreans oppose a policy of confrontation, those younger not brought up during the indoctrination of the Cold War years.

Understandable the book asks what will happen when current incumbent in the South, President Lee Myung-bak sees his term expire next year? But his leadership departure is not the only one in the next period of potential significance. For different reasons all the key players in this drama face major but contrasting dilemmas in their respective Korea policies. These are fully outlined and assessed.

The book also undertakes some salutary detective work on the March 2010 sinking of the South Korean corvette the *Cheonan*. Just what did occur over this sinking and why? As one chapter heading puts it, this seemed a case of going from smoking gun to rusty torpedo. For the book 'the debate over whether the vessel was sunk by grounding, by a mine or by a torpedo could be construed to reflect differences of opinion expressed in good faith. But the fabrication of evidence takes us into different territory – in particular how something fished out of the water after 50 days was both freshly painted with North Korean markings but showed corrosion which, according to the Russian experts, indicated that it had been under water for more than six months.

If history teaches us anything, it is that clearly unequal treaties between nations are inherently unstable. Although we don't need Hitler's exploitation of the Versailles treaty to teach us that, the lesson seems not yet to have been fully learned. The book is right to make this warning over Korea. Here we need look no further than a comment quoted in the book from a South Korean newspaper in June of last year, namely that 'it is completely illogical that South Korea which cries "Global Korea" with the national strength to host even a G 20 summit, but is volunteering to remain the only nation in the world to entrust operational command to a foreign military'.

What we now discern throughout the Asia Pacific with respect to North Korea, and among the big East Asian players (China, Japan, ROK) is that the issues entailed must be resolved by engagement, assurance and negotiation which is steadily carrying the day against US instincts for unilateral military action.

Finally what of the people concerned? We deserve more than a thought to those who flee the North but who find conditions in the south often far from hospitable. Those with trauma face inadequate services, the South sadly having one of the highest suicide rates in the world. Jimmy Carter's cited comments of last year are noted: namely 'North Koreans have been suffering now for 50 years, not only because of the policies of the government in Pyongyang but because the international community increases their suffering by forbidding normal trade, commerce and the supply of the basic necessities of life.'

My reading of this study which I am happy to launch today reinforces arguments that there is no substitute for the detailed, independent evaluation of conditions on the ground as they actually exist. Failure to do so brought the Americans to grief over Vietnam and will now do so again in Afghanistan. The danger in Korea is less one of another quagmire of military intervention so much as a failure to change a mindset seen as justifying such engagement. Doing so requires a debate about Korea that is critical, objective and informed. This book provides just such an incentive to do so.

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