



REALITY CHECK

DIVERSE VOICES ON INTERNAL CONFLICT

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North Korea, one of the world's most isolated nations, faces desperate economic conditions due to major drought and government mismanagement. It is estimated that over one million North Koreans have already died of famine. International food aid deliveries have allowed the reclusive North Korean regime to escape the full consequences of economic failure, but the population today still remains vulnerable to prolonged malnutrition, if not outright starvation. The extensive suffering has led many to question the region's role in addressing the internal crisis in North Korea. Dr. Chung Oknim has been a keen observer of North Korea from her posts as a member of the Junior Advisory Group to the National Security Council of South Korea since 1999, and as a member of the Advisory Group to the Ministry of National Unification from 2001-2002. She has been a post-doctoral visiting scholar at Stanford University's Asia-Pacific Research Center, and a visiting fellow at both the Hoover Institution and the Brookings Institution's Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies. Dr. Chung also served as Co-coordinator of the Council on Foreign Relations-Seoul Forum Project on “Managing Change on the Korean Peninsula.”

FFP: Let's start by hearing about your current work in Seoul.

I'm a research fellow at The Sejong Institute. The Institute was established in the early 1980s by the former president of the Republic of Korea, Chun Doo Hwan. It is now a private think tank dealing with national security, diplomacy and reunification issues. As the only private, civilian think

tank in South Korea, I believe it has a promising future. I am currently doing research on the US-North Korea relationship, and on US-South Korea security cooperation and policy coordination toward North Korea. In addition, I am interested in the East Asian security dynamic and the possibility of “minilateralism,” the term we use for multilateralism concentrating on the Northeast Asian region. At the same time, I work for several government agencies, including the Ministry of Unification and the Ministry of

Technology and Science, which deals with the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization.¹

FFP: What is your assessment of the situation in North Korea?

North Korea is already in a humanitarian crisis. However, this crisis is frequently and easily overshadowed by the security situation on the Korean peninsula. The people in North Korea are living like prisoners under the dictatorship of Kim Jong Il and the social control of his regime is astonishing, really unbelievable. The international workers who went to the North in 1995 and 1996 to provide aid to the suffering North Koreans were shocked at the efficiency of the government

control. It is really a unique regime in that it is a dictatorship that forces its people to suffer and starve to death, but the government itself is so stable. Because of these unique characteristics, it may be very difficult for the international community to be involved in the humanitarian situation in the North. It will take time. On the Korean peninsula, the humanitarian crisis will always be accompanied by the security crisis, so we have to consider the two together.



Dr. Chung Oknim

The Fund for Peace is issuing an occasional series of interviews featuring leading voices on issues related to internal war. The Regional Responses to Internal War program is funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and is being carried out in partnership with the Stanley Foundation.

FfP: Can you describe the security situation as you see it?

North Korea poses a threat to the international community. It has weapons of mass destruction, and it is also suspected of developing nuclear weapons, though we don't know yet whether it has already produced nuclear weapons or not. But, from South Korea's point of view, the North's conventional weaponry, like artillery deployed along the demilitarized zone (DMZ), is actually more threatening than missile technology or biochemical weapons. This is why South Korea has pursued an engagement policy towards the North. The geostrategic situation in Northeast Asia, particularly on the Korean peninsula, dictates that we take a rather moderate approach toward the North. If there is ever a second war between the North and the South, we are sure that we will be the final winner. But if that war means the total destruction of Seoul and other important areas, the victory would not be meaningful. This is why South Korea continually tries to engage the North, rather than pursue a policy of benign neglect or containment.

FfP: There have been reports that around one million people have died of starvation and related illnesses in North Korea. Is that an accurate assessment?

Actually, we don't have any exact figures about the humanitarian crisis. The North Korean and Chinese governments will not allow international workers or the United Nations to interview North Koreans or survey the situation. It is like a black box. We don't know anything for sure, we can only guess. Our sources of information are limited to defectors from the North, and to Chinese who live along the border. I cannot say whether that number is accurate. But what I can say is that the situation is well-controlled by the North, and there is no anarchy. We think that the regime will maintain control for at least another decade.

FfP: What effect does the suffering in the North have on the South Korean public?

We have a strong feeling toward the people starving in the North, because Koreans are homogeneous and reunification is considered inevitable. I have my relatives in the North, just as almost everybody does. So we are sorry and feel terrible to see the nation starve. Our families, brothers and sisters are starving because of the dictatorship of Kim Jong-II. But the problem is that the North Korean leadership won't allow South Koreans or South Korean government agencies to be involved in distributing humanitarian aid in the North. That's why when the North first appealed to the international community to

get aid, they didn't appeal to the South Korean people or the South Korean government. But now they are gradually opening their society because they are beginning to realize that Koreans are the only alternative to help solve their problems.

FfP: Is there a possibility that an implosion of the North Korean regime could occur? How would that be handled?

Kim Jong Il has a strong grip on power. He has tightly controlled the military by placing his relatives, his brothers-in-law, in important positions. He has also engaged the military as a whole by giving them special favors and privileges. So far, he is succeeding very well from his own perspective. Nevertheless, it is not impossible for us to imagine some sort of implosion in the North. In South Korea, for example, nobody imagined that the military dictator Park Chung Hee would be assassinated by his closest associate, who was the chief of the Korean intelligence service at the time. So there is a possibility that something of this kind might occur in the North, though it does not seem likely, based on a practical assessment of the situation.

FfP: What if an implosion occurs? How would South Korea react?

That may be the worst case scenario for South Korea to imagine and to handle, but we do have a contingency plan. The constitution of South Korea must be the first reference point. It states that all the people on the Korean peninsula belong to the Republic of Korea. That means that if there is something happening in North Korea and a huge number of refugees come to the South, we will regard all the people from the North as Koreans. In that sense, if there is something happening, and we don't have any option but to be involved in that difficult situation, we will go to the North as liberators, not as occupiers. That is the major difference between West Germany and South Korea. In the case of West Germany, they adopted a federal system, but in the case of the Korean peninsula, we consider all the territory on the Korean peninsula as ours. So if something happens, according to the constitution of South Korea, we have every right to interfere, since we see it as a domestic matter.

FfP: Isn't that also the North Korean approach, to see the entire peninsula as one country?

Yes, they have made it clear that their ultimate goal is to reunify the Korean peninsula by force, and to communize it. So it is a zero-sum game situation. But South Korea is

stable, it has already succeeded in economic takeoff, and we are moving toward a more mature democracy. In this regard, South Korea is far better off than North Korea. If reunification is realized on the Korean peninsula, that reunification will probably be on South Korea's terms, not North Korea's. That is why we must be prepared with contingency planning.

FfP: What role, if any, would you expect a regional organization to play? ASEAN or ASEAN + 3?²

Actually, we don't expect ASEAN or ASEAN + 3 to make a great contribution to a solution on the Korean peninsula. But diplomatically speaking, we need international understanding or sympathy from outside countries. That is why South Korea is actively involved in the East Timor operation, to get more moral and political support from ASEAN countries. We know that the key actors are four outside countries [the United States, China, Japan and Russia] whose policies have an impact on the Korean peninsula. But global society is not that simple. Each country, other than the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, has one vote on an equal basis in the United Nations and regional organizations. We need both global and regional understanding if we intend to reunify the Korean peninsula. American military support will be essential for unification in the future, but from others, moral support, not material or military support is needed.

FfP: What about the interests of the major powers?

In our contingency planning, we are very conscious of the major powers, which have a great stake in the situation. First of all, we take into account the United States. We will cooperate and coordinate very closely with the United States; the US and South Korea have maintained an alliance for almost five decades now. We will also try to obtain the understanding of China, Japan, and Russia. China is an important country for us as it is the only country that still has a military alliance with the North. According to the security treaty between North Korea and China, if North Korea is invaded or interfered with by outside powers, China has a right to be involved, to interfere, and to be on North Korea's side. So if an implosion happens in the North - which will undoubtedly lead to a humanitarian crisis - we must consult with the United States and China. That is the only way for South Korea to "Koreanize" the situation on the Korean peninsula, by getting more help and support from the outside powers.

FfP: You mentioned the need for consultation with both China and the US – what are the current attitudes?

We have the Four Party Talks, the key participants being both Koreas, the United States and China.³ But the situation is very complicated. The signatories of the armistice in 1953 were the United Nations, the Chinese People's Volunteers, and North Korea, but not South Korea, because at that time, President Rhee Syngman rejected the armistice and refused to sign with the other parties. Now the North Korean leadership is arguing for a peace agreement or peace treaty, not with South Korea,

South Korea is very much looking forward to utilizing ASEAN + 3 to develop a cooperative and consultative mechanism among Asian countries.

but with the United States because they want to guarantee their own regime survival. But the South Korean government wants very strongly to be a key actor in deciding the future of the Korean peninsula. What the South Korean government has in mind for the four party talks is to sign a peace agreement between North and South Korea, which can then be endorsed by China and the United States. But North Korea has a different idea. So the situation is really difficult to solve. Nevertheless, the four party talks can develop in a more practical way that will provide us with some sort of context to handle the situation.

FfP: How is the Korean peninsula situation affected by the bilateral relationship between the United States and China?

Interestingly enough, we have two security flashpoints in Northeast Asia: one is North Korea, and the other is the Taiwan Straits. When it comes to the Taiwan Straits, the US and China have diverging interests, and US interests are totally different from those of China. But regarding the Korean peninsula, they share common interests. Neither country wants to see a second war on the Korean peninsula; so first of all, no war. Secondly, no nuclearization on the Korean peninsula. If North Korea finally develops nuclear weapons, South Korea will follow suit. And if South Korea follows suit, Japan will produce nuclear weapons, and Taiwan will follow suit. The end result would be that the United States would not be able to exert its own influence in Northeast Asia. The real reason why the United States is concerned about North Korea's nuclear program is the geostrategic chain of events that would be set in motion.

However, if reunification occurs, the interests of the US and China will begin to diverge. First of all, the US wants to maintain its troops on the Korean peninsula, even after the reunification, to stabilize the balance of power in Northeast Asia. But China does not want to see US troops after reunification, because China would then face US troops on its own border, in the Yalu region. Of course, China realizes now that the American troops on the Korean peninsula prevent Japan from going nuclear, from becoming more militarized. So reunification would be positive on the one hand, but could also have a negative impact on the region and in the bilateral relationships among major powers on the other.

FfP: When the violence was breaking out in East Timor, was there any call by the public in Korea for their government to take action or to put pressure on the government in Indonesia to stop the violence?

That's a very interesting question. You know, in this post-Cold War period, South Korea remains an island of Cold War legacy. We are still preoccupied in a Cold War stand-off, North and South Korea armed to the teeth along the DMZ. We are not all that interested in what is really going on in the outside world. Fortunately, we have a very globalized president, Kim Dae Jung, who is very much interested in the situations in East Timor and in Aceh. But, unfortunately, he is not that popular among the South Korean public. So I don't think there is much or enough pressure from the public on the government to do something more active with problem-solving in other areas. But we know that we owe much to the international community for their role during the Korean War. So we do usually have a common sentiment of wanting to act, to help others suffering from humanitarian crises, out of the feeling that we need to pay something back to the outside world. Also, in preparation for a future situation, in order to get more moral and political support, and even military support, we need to contribute now. That's the common sentiment among the Korean people as well as among the government agencies.

FfP: Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the development of capacity at a regional level to deal with issues like humanitarian emergencies?

We are only in the beginning stages, compared to regional integration in Europe. So we have a long way to go. But I think we are moving in the right direction. Regional organizations, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and ASEAN + 3, even ASEAN, seem to end up with dialogue for dialogue's sake.⁴ They are really gentlemen's clubs for getting together and getting along. They talk and talk with no outcome. Whenever we have a conference in East Asia, we come to the venue and we see all the same faces. Even in 1997, when East Asia suffered a major financial crisis, the regional organizations couldn't do anything. The US took charge, and the International Monetary Fund and other international organizations tackled the issue. That is what Asian cooperation or Asian regionalism is about. We know that.

But relatively speaking, cooperation among the Southeast Asian countries is better than cooperation in Northeast Asia because of diverging interests. It would be very difficult for us to create a cooperative mechanism in Northeast Asia. We will need some time to utilize a regional organization to solve the region's pending issues. On the question of whether a regional organization can do something positive for the solution of humanitarian crises – of course, now I am pessimistic, but I have every reason to be cautiously optimistic about the future. From South Korea's point of view, we are very much looking forward to utilizing ASEAN + 3 to develop a cooperative and consultative mechanism among Asian countries.

--Washington, DC, July 18, 2002

¹ The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) was established to construct light water reactors in North Korea as part of a 1994 agreement in which North Korea pledged to freeze and ultimately dismantle its nuclear weapons program in exchange for the power plants.

² ASEAN includes Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. ASEAN + 3 includes the ASEAN members as well as China, Japan, and South Korea.

³ The Four Party Talks were initially proposed by South Korean President Kim Young Sam and U.S. President Bill Clinton in April 1996. The first meeting took place in December 1997. However, the process has been stalled since the most recent meeting in August 1999.

⁴ The ASEAN Regional Forum includes the ASEAN + 3 members as well as Australia, Canada, the European Union, India, Mongolia, New Zealand, North Korea, Papua New Guinea, Russia, and the United States. For a list of the twenty-one members of APEC, see <http://www.apecsec.org.sg>.

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