Emanuel Pastreich
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Program in Arms Control, Disarmament and International Security
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

DMZs Seen and Unseen;
The Real Challenges of Security and Culture in the 21st Century

We often think of North Korea, or Taiwan, as the last remaining traces of a cold war order that stand on the edge of collapse. We imagine that both problems may be resolved in the next decade, or perhaps even sooner, as economic forces overwhelm military and ideological conventions. Yet I would posit that we are perhaps being misled by our own preconceptions. How can it be that as tensions increase in the United States media and more spending for the military is approved in the Blue House that those on the street in Seoul seem to feel quite at ease with the current process of economic integration between North and South Korea, and an unprecedented group of South Koreans civilians have taken off for a ceremony in Pyongyang? How do we reconcile these divergent events? How can tensions mount between Japan and North Korea (or even South Korea and Japan) at the same time that economic integration between North Korea and China, Japan and South Korea continues unabated? Part of the situation derives from misunderstandings. Part of the situation derives from the unique challenge of a cultural and technological nature posed by the 21st century.

We still do not know how events on the Korean peninsula will play out. But I would like to suggest here, just as a possibility, that what we observe on the Korean peninsula today is not a holdover from a conflict that belongs in the ash-bin of history, but a sample of the new multi-dimensional conflicts borne of economic, technological and cultural factors that are just starting to bloom. Perhaps we are dealing with a new age of conflict in international relations. Could it be that citizens of Seoul are uniquely unaware of the seriousness of current events? Or is there a disconnect between daily life and political turmoil that can be found around the world? Let me quote Irving Howe with reference to the uncertainties that we face in the present day.

> "Precariously, we are still in the world of the human as we have understood it, for nothing can be more human than to keep operating with familiar categories of thought while discovering they will no longer suffice."[1]

Could we live in a world in which international groups struggle for ascendancy without tanks going through the streets, where battles for control take place without the man in the street ever having any idea what is taking place? Could the conflict on the Korean peninsula, Taiwan straits, or many other places around the world, which seem so opaque

[1] Irving Howe *New York Review of Books,* August 15, 1991, p. 53

and confusing, be the new model for human struggle? We may imagine the Korean peninsula as a deviation from the classic contiguous nation state. But could it just be that the entire world around Korea has been so fractured by the forces of globalization and social/technological change that there is no such world to return to?

One cannot consider the Korean peninsula without considering the entirety of East Asia including Japan, China, South Korea and even Vietnam. If one looks at the region on that scale the best word to describe the current situation--and the situation throughout much of the world--is simply: "massive integration and massive fragmentation." At one level we find great cultural and economic integration. Universals of behavior, food and dress converge throughout the world to an unprecedented degree. International organizations have increasing importance in every part of the world, multi-national corporations following often standardized procedures are found in every city and town. And yet, at precisely the same moment that customs and concepts converge, we find a subtle fragmentation in global society as well. We see it in the United States as we do in Korea. In part because of the internet, mass media and other technological changes, we form increasingly tight networks for communication and cultural identity that often ignore national boundaries and reduce public discourse. How is it that we have so little contact with our neighbors about anything, but are engaged so reverently in debate with those whom we have never even met via e-mail. A new world has emerged while we were not looking.

So how do these changes relate to the Korean peninsula? How is it possible that the United States postulates North Korea as the greatest security threat and the South Korean government is compelled to increase spending on defense and at the very same time a group of over 1,000 South Koreans cross the D.M.Z. to attend the opening of a Gymnasium built with funds supplied by the late Chung Ju-yung, Hyundai's founder? The immediate answer is that we live in a world gone crazy. Or perhaps we live in a world in which threats are entirely invisible until they have struck? Could it be that East Asia is integrating at a rapid pace that no one can stop but that serious threats remain out there, just not the same ones we imagined? How could it be that while the United States government debates a first strike against North Korea, great enthusiasm is given on national television in South Korea for sports events involving both sides?

Part of the problem is simply short-sighted politics. In a foolish bid to create a politically expedient crisis and to maintain the status-quo in East Asia rather than embracing a more visionary approach to ineluctable economic and political change, the current administration has created an entirely unnecessary crisis on the peninsula. North Korea should never have been so completely isolated as to force its hand. More importantly, the domestic media plays down (or ignores) every sign of possible reconciliation. For those of us who read the Korean news online, we often feel we are living in two separate realities.

But the nature of integration is certainly a complicated one. Let me give two concrete examples of the contradictions inherent in integration between North and South Korea today. First, North Korea's economic integration with Japan, China and South Korea continues on in an opaque manner that defies ready comprehension. There have been repeated reports that products labeled as "Made in China" are in fact produced in North Korea. Many North Koreans seek employment in China and Chinese interests have established ties with North Korea. The exact nature of North Korea's economic ties with

the rest of East Asia is opaque. Yet it is opaque at precisely the moment that East Asia is developing an immense informal economy completely beyond the reach of any government. The problem is not simply a North Korea problem. The growth of this informal, unregulated, untaxed and often illegal economic network that includes North Korea, China, Japan and other parts of East Asia should be a great matter of concern.

Another example of the paradoxical nature of recent developments in Korea appeared in the online version of the Korean Journal "Mal." [2] The story (in Korean) concerns a certain conservative Korean politician who has suddenly changed his mind about North Korea. A prominent legislator in the conservative Hannaradang Party by the name of Cho Unggyu and a close business associate of his Kim Boemhun have both been involved in a drive to collect signatures aimed at liberalizing relations with North Korea. The particular issue in this case is a move to liberalize the regulations concerning South Korean access to North Korean websites (many of which may well be located in China or Japan). The Ministry of Unification has strict rules concerning the ability of average Korean citizens to access these sites, including a pre-registration process. The signatures were collected in order to change the regulations. The question is why a conservative politician whose party has been openly antagonistic towards North Korea would support such a move. It turns out that various businesses are interested in establishing gambling establishments, especially those run via the internet, in North Korea. Easy access to North Korean websites is vital to establishing on-line gambling.
Cho Unggyu has been giving the Ministry of Reunification a lot of grief about the registration required of South Koreans who wish to explore the North Korean web. The motivation is anything but altruism. The growing consensus in South Korea, however, is that North Korea should be open for business.[3]

The Six-Power meeting involving North Korea was a positive step, if muted, step in addressing the problems posed by North Korea's odd position. Certainly it was a move away from a long period of indifference to the subtle and serious diplomatic and security issues posed by North Korea. It was not a substitute for simple bilateral talks between the

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[2] "Mal" Volume 207. September, 2003. Article "Less than Humorous Events involved in the Collection of Signatures for Liberalization of Internet Access" by Sonng Boknam (www.digitalmal.com/news/news_read.php?no=7186).

[3] See the October 8, 2003posting of the Ministry of Unification on South Korean attitudes towards North Korea:

"Some 60 percent of South Korean companies engaged in trade with North Korea are doing business in an indirect way via China and other countries and that some two-thirds (64.3 percent) of them want it turned into direct trade, according to a unification ministry survey conducted last month."

"The ministry and the Korea International Trade Association (KITA) conducted jointly a survey of 300 major companies September 8-23 to collect basic data for the formulation of government policies on expanded direct inter-Korean trade as agreed on during the sixth Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation Promotion Committee."
http://www.kois.go.kr/

United States and North Korea. The more profound problem was the perception gap. North Korea is portrayed in the United States media as a Stalinist regime out of control and capable of raining shells on Seoul or launching nuclear missiles at the United States. Such an image is not accurate at all and obscures the give and take between factions within North Korea itself. Yet we would be naïve if we did not see danger in North Korea. The problem is that North Korea is a grave threat of an entirely different breed.

North Korea is at the heart of a sprawling underworld of arms smuggling, counterfeiting, drugs, and protection. The government supports itself through traffic in heroin and methamphetamines. It at least as much money from its elicit exports of ballistic missiles, counterfeit dollars, heroin and other drugs, and endangered species as it does from the legitimate exports of crabs, clams, mushrooms, ginseng, logs, metals and minerals. The beast driving this frightening economy is far larger than North Korea. The real danger of the recent advancement in nuclear development in North Korea lies not in the fantasy scenario in which North Korea actually launches such a device, but rather that North Korea allows plutonium to find its way into this swamp.

A larger invisible economy is growing rapidly throughout East Asia and the world. It may ultimately be far more dangerous than anything that appears on television —and I personally think nothing could be more appropriate than having the opening remarks for this event delivered by Dr. Hoffman. The recent announcement on Wednesday that the SBS network in South Korea will open an office in Kesong North Korea indicates a significant change on the peninsula. And yet if the larger question is considered, will normalization of relations between North and South Korea, or even a plan for reunification lead to a reduction in illegal trafficking in drugs and arms, the prospects are not that promising. We may end up with a multinational invisible network of terror in East Asia that has but one hydra head in Pyongyang and branch offices all over East and Central Asia.

There is a precedent for such a security threat in East Asia. It is the poorly understood crypto-nation known as the wako pirates. This group of mercenaries was equipped with large boats and advanced weapons. They seized provisions, hostages and valuables in their attacks along the Chinese coast. In 1552 they staged full-scale invasions of inland cities in Zhejiang and set up a base on Zhusan Island near present-day Shanghai. The Wako pirates also included, most likely, a good number of Koreans as well.[4] Although the Wako pirates are thought of as Japanese, they were made up of Chinese and other nationalities (if we can use that anachronistic term). The attempts of the Ming dynasty, lumbering superpower of that age, to suppress these activities consumed an immense amount of resources. The predatory activities of these “pirates” (an insufficient term as they were remarkably well organized) only declined when the Japanese organized their military for the purposes of reunification. The result, however, was an organized military force which went beyond coastal raids. A full-scale invasion of

[4]The Japanese scholar Tanaka Takeo argues that there were both Korean and Chinese "wako" pirates in the 15th-16th century. Murai Shoosuke, in his "Ijin wajin-den" documents cases from the Choson Imperial Records of individuals identified in Korean as "waein" (wako) who are explicitly identified as having "Korean" parentage.

Korea began in 1592. The Ming dynasty was fatally weakened in the battle to stop that military adventure.

The question I wish to pose is whether we are in fact barking up the wrong tree. Could it be that in order to justify a security system set up to fight the Korean War all over again we have intentionally failed to recognize the shifting nature of security concerns? We are not equipped to deal with the threat at hand. There are threats out there. Yet for our own peace of mind, we would rather imagine a "rogue nation" out there. The problem is that the United States may find that both North Korea and Iraq end up with rulers in the next five years who can shake hands on T.V with the president of the United States, while the powers that lurk beneath the surface run rampant.