

NUCLEAR CRISIS OR IDENTITY CRISIS: NORTH KOREA IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

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Introduction

For the second time in a decade, the Korean peninsula has become the focus of international attention over an alleged North Korean nuclear weapons program. The war of words has heated up since the latest ruckus began last fall and as of today no solution appears near at hand. The US demands a multilateral approach to verifiably and permanently end the North's nuclear program. The North insists that the issue can be settled bilaterally with the US in exchange for security guarantees and unspecified economic assistance. Considering the US administration's concern over the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (including the spread of advanced missile technology) and with the military option always remaining on the table - along with the even harsher threats emanating out of Pyongyang, the situation has the potential to spiral out of control - leading to a security nightmare in Northeast Asia. Although the US has made clear its intention to resolve the matter peacefully, when it comes to Korean affairs, from the end of the Second World War until today, when going it alone the US has had a track record of missteps and miscalculations on the peninsula. The Bush administration seems to be no exception to this general rule - from the reversal of the Clinton-era engagement policy with the North and the gains that it had made to the poor handling of the South Korean-US alliance, the current administration seems to lack a consistent Korea policy.

In the standoff over the North's nuclear ambitions, the world expects and demands the US to act circumspectly. We must also understand, however, that the diplomacy to date has not been fruitful. On the contrary, the two sides appear to be talking past each other rather than to each other and such miscommunication can lead to misunderstanding and war. This miscommunication - that the two sides are unable to even conduct formal diplomacy - is indicative of a larger issue. Both are operating and engaging the world on different planes. In this brief paper, I will discuss the North Korean problem from the perspective of postmodern international relations theory of Empire. I argue that since the end of the cold war and the emergence of the new paradigm of Empire, North Korea has been struggling with an identity crisis-how it perceives the world and how the world perceives it. The regime, which was born out of the Japanese colonial era, and matured under the threat of American "imperialism" is unable to negotiate the transition between modern forms of sovereignty of the nation-state (out of which it was born) and the postmodern world of Empire from which the international community, particularly the US, is responding to it.

North Korea in a Postmodern World

The application of postmodern theory to international relations has resulted in new approaches to the understanding of global power structures. In general, these theorists attempt to deconstruct the traditional dialectics of modernity, ultimately calling into question the sovereignty of the nation-state. These theories have been useful in helping us to interpret the new forms of power that have emerged in the post-Cold War period. One of the more recent and debated postmodern theories in IR has been Hardt and Negri's concept of Empire. They argue that a new paradigm shift is underway; a new form of sovereignty is emerging before our very eyes, cast in the shape of global Empire with imperial not imperialist interests, dominated not by a single power such as the US (although the US has a privileged role in it as the sole superpower) - it is "a new logic of structure and rule—in short a new form of sovereignty." In this passage from the modern to the postmodern, the boundaries between inside and outside, Self and Other, public and private—the dialectics that modernity itself created—begin to fade. They argue that the modern concept of the nation-state is waning as a postmodern global network of distribution of power emerges in the form of such bodies as the UN, NGOs, international conglomerates, and the Internet in conjunction with the rise of a single superpower, advancements in military technology and the expansion of capitalist markets throughout the world. In short, the modern nation-state and its traditional boundaries—including the binaries the nation-state creates, such as inside and outside, Self and Other—is disappearing from the world stage, replaced instead by a new form of Empire where boundaries are becoming more and more porous and conflict takes the shape of localized "just" police actions in a global civil war.¹

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a description of the new paradigm of Empire, but the theory is nonetheless useful in illuminating the current situation on the Korean peninsula and I will at times fall back on it in the course of my discussion. Key to this understanding is the transition that the world is undergoing from modern sovereignty to postmodern Empire. I argue that the North Korean regime, including all aspects of its system, is unable and unwilling to negotiate the widening chasm between the modern perspective from which it was born and raised and from which it perceives the world and the postmodern paradigm of Empire from which the world is responding. The North is experiencing an identity crisis and is unable on its own to negotiate the transition from modernity to postmodernity. The rigidity of the regime, the backwardness of its labor force and market system and the lack of a civil society, among other issues, are modern obstacles that prevent it from participating in the postmodern world of Empire. Shaped by nationalist forces that were legitimate during an earlier period, it is stuck in a crisis of modernity and the only way out is the short-term very modern solution of nuclear weapons—which further delineate the binaries of modernity by reinforcing the differences between inside and outside—without solving the structural problems inherent to the regime and its system.

Nationalism in the twentieth century—as part of modernity—played an important role in shaping group identity, defending against colonialism and imperialism and helping foster the rise of nation-states in defense of rival powers. Modern colonial and imperial ambitions of Europe, the US and Japan created distinct boundaries between the metropole and the periphery in order to exploit territories for economic advantage. In the process, boundaries between Self and Other, the civilized world and the uncivilized, Us and Them were produced and reinforced at a variety of levels. Nationalism, on the other hand, was a

¹ See Hardt and Negri for a full description, pp. 3–21.

response to these external threats and led to political movements that helped break the economic and political ties between colonizers and colonized, leading the way for national self-determination. In other words, nationalist movements helped to break the back of colonialism and imperialism following WWII, leading to national liberation and the creation of independent nation-states. Nevertheless, despite all its claims to freedom from external threats coming from other modern nation-states, nationalism relied on the same modern paradigms of the nation-state by reinforcing the binaries inherited from colonialism. The nation, as constructed through the nationalist project, became the vehicle for self-determination and provided freedom from external domination but in the same breath borrowed the language of the colonizer and reinforced the dialectics of power relations.² In essence, nationalism, like colonialism and imperialism, reinforced the concept of modern sovereignty where the nation-state reigns supreme.

Korea was no exception. Nationalism in the form of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism is deeply rooted in the intellectual landscape of both Koreas. Although it can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century in such organizations as the Independence Club, not until the Japanese formally annexed the peninsula in 1905 and then colonized it from 1910 did nationalism—in response to a deepening sense of crisis—begin to have a profound influence on the political direction Korea would take later in the twentieth century. The colonial era and how intellectuals in Korea responded to it played a profound influence on the formation of an emerging modern Korean identity. Koreans, on the periphery of the Japanese colonial empire (albeit a vital segment of it), were defined by the Japanese as the colonial Other—different from the Japanese in language and culture, often called lazy and uncivilized whose history was one of stagnation and cultural borrowing from China—and hence inferior and in need of the Japanese civilizing project. At the same time, however, Koreans began to wrestle control of their own identity by writing their own histories, modern stories, and conducting ethnographic and anthropological studies to contest the Japanese colonial construct. Whereas Japanese archeologists, folklorists and ethnographers came in droves to Korea to quantify, measure, dig up, investigate and record all aspects of Korea (such scientific investigation was part of the modernizing project), Korean scholars tried to beat the Japanese at their own game. Such Korean nationalist scholars as Shin Chae Ho and Ch'oe Nam-Sun wrote from a Korean-centered perspective. Ch'oe, for instance, wrote two important studies *Tan'gunmon* and *Purham munhwaron*, arguing the superiority of Korean civilization over those of China and Japan. Korean intellectuals were responding to the Japanese construction of Korean identity by inverting then reinforcing the walls between the Self and Other while arguing the uniqueness of Korean identity vis-à-vis the outside. Following liberation in 1945, scholars of nationalist historiography (*minjok sahak*) set out to write a new racial history of Korean independence from an anti-Japanese and anti-colonial perspective. Korean national historiography in both the North and the South has taught that Korean racial and cultural superiority over other East Asian nations has resulted in the continuing spirit of Korean survival and struggle over the Chinese, various nomadic peoples (including the Mongols) and Japanese and Westerners. In these histories, Korea has been depicted as a victim of superpower politics and invasion since time immemorial. Both North and South Korean historians have defined their national identities as victims of Japanese colonialism and international power politics. During the colonial period and immediately

² Hardt and Negri, pp. 132-133.

after, there was a struggle to rewrite history, take control of it to counter Japanese colonial history and create a uniquely nationalist-centered perspective of Korea.³

The North Korean regime was forged in the modern politics of anti-colonialism and came of age under the ideology and slogans of anti-imperialism in response to the threat of its existence by the US. Not only is the spirit of the state ascribed to the revolutionary background of the regime's eternal president Kim Il Song—who although a fairly-successful guerilla fighter against the Japanese in the early 1940s, is touted as *the* central figure in the struggle against Japanese colonialism and the liberator of the entire Korean people from American imperialism—but the state-ascribed philosophy *chuche*, which roughly translates as “self-reliance,” is descriptive of the politics of the modern nation-state: the nation-state is a self-contained entity that can function and prosper independently of other nation-states. *Chuche*, which arose during the period of competition for legitimacy with the South, the threat of American attack and the fallout from the Sino-Soviet Split, reinforces the boundaries of inside and outside, suggests the identity crisis that North Korea is experiencing today and its inability to negotiate the paradigm shift away from modernity to postmodern Empire.

From the 1990s, North Korea has been on the periphery of the newly emerging Empire, both threatened by and threatening it. North Koreans are unable to negotiate the paradigm shift away from the nation-state and the centrality of nationalism and its dialectic boundaries, instead relying on modern forms of sovereignty and the modern notion that the nation-state reigns supreme. Indeed, the North has been tempted by Empire—we need only count the number of NGOs and other donor programs that have operated in the North, including the highly regulated business projects now taking place with a few privileged South Korean companies—but does not exactly like what it sees. Because of the threats they feel from the new paradigm of Empire, they seek to shore up the modern binaries upon which they were founded (*vis-à-vis* the South, Japan and the US). Nuclear weapons appear their only solution. In a sense, it is not only a “defense against US imperialism,” but more importantly a defense against the postmodern world order of Empire. And as that Empire has no center, those weapons will serve as a defense against outsiders, be it the successful “brother” in the southern part of the peninsula, the US, Japan or even China and Russia. Anything that may potentially threaten the sanctity of the North Korean nation-state is defined as the enemy of the North. We have already seen Pyongyang threaten the UN, demanding it to remain neutral in the current debate over its nuclear weapons program. The North is more and more alienated from the network of Empire, lost in a bygone era. It is stuck in the modern period, unable to make that postmodern leap. Modern sovereignty is changing and the North is unable to respond.

North Korea is undergoing a crisis. The most recognizable problem the North is having is in terms of its economy, infrastructure and ability to feed its own people. Still, these are just manifestations of a larger identity crisis. It lost the competition for legitimacy with the South and can no longer claim to represent the Korean people as a whole. It still relies on old definitions that were successful in overcoming its colonial past and guarding against imperialism but today ring hollow in the postmodern world. Desiring the bomb itself implies an inability to break from modern definitions of sovereignty. How can the simple colonial

³ This is an on-going project. I recently received an email from a volunteer in South Korea urging me to help correct the way foreigners understand Korean history. The writer depicted all forms of history written outside of Korea as being translated directly from Japanese textbooks and, hence, wrong. Instead, we should try to teach Korean history from the perspective of Korea-written textbooks, the email argued.

and imperial binaries upon which the North Korean nation-state arose and continues to define itself serve to justify the North Korean nation-state in a postmodern world? The North is now unsure of what to do and in which direction to turn.

Understanding North Korean action as a symptom of a modern/postmodern crisis of identity can shed light on the problems that the North Korean regime is undergoing following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the decline of sovereignty of the nation-state and the subsequent emergence of Empire. This issue points to a major problem concerning the North. The North must come to terms with the notion of Empire and postmodernity in redefining itself in this postmodern world. It is a problem that only the North can solve on its own (but if Pyongyang were sincere, the outside world would help). They are tempted by Empire and the material comforts it can bring but are increasingly weary because the new paradigm does not jive with the paradigm from which they respond to the world. The North must adapt to this new world order. If not, it will be left behind and finally face its extinction one way or another. How the North negotiates this chasm requires a fundamental shift in the way it looks at the world. Perhaps the North can make this shift on its own, perhaps it can be tempted into it. At any rate, to avert catastrophe on the peninsula, the North's passage to postmodernity must be negotiated. By demanding security guarantees from the US, for instance, it is demanding a special place in Empire, a guarantee that its ossified system will be allowed to survive without being challenge militarily or otherwise—it wants a promise to exist, a place in the Empire that is untouchable. The US should not and cannot provide such guarantees. Even if it did do so in the form of international treaties and obligations (another form of modern sovereignty), the fundamental nature of the leap the North must make to the postmodern world inevitably threaten the existence the identity of the present North Korean state. A peaceful solution to the North's identity crisis can be found but it must originate from within the North.

Bibliography

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