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**EAST ASIA AT A TURNING POINT:
HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND FUTURE PROSPECTS**

**EL ESTE DE ASIA EN UNA ENCRUCIJADA:
CONTEXTO HISTÓRICO Y PERSPECTIVAS DE FUTURO**

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ABSTRACT: In the context of the 2018-2019 summit meetings between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, in this paper I seek to place the process of negotiations between the United States and North Korea in a wider historical and geographical perspective. Recent developments on the Korean Peninsula can be seen as part of a long historical process of power shifts within the East Asian region, stretching back at least to the late nineteenth century. These shifts have not only altered the nature of regional political hegemony, but also resulted in a reshaping of the social space of East Asia. From this perspective, it can be argued that East Asia is indeed at a crucial turning point, whose implications can be sketched in a broad-brush way, but not defined in detail. To understand the nature of the current turning point, it is important not only to focus on negotiations between the US and North Korea, but to see these in the framework of shifting relations between the other countries of the region.

Keywords: Korean Peninsula, United States, East Asia, regional power balance, social space.

RESUMEN: En el contexto de las cumbres celebradas entre el presidente de los Estados Unidos, Donald Trump, y el líder norcoreano Kim Jong Un en 2018-2019, este documento busca colocar el proceso de negociaciones entre los Estados Unidos y Corea del Norte en una perspectiva histórica y geográfica más amplia. Los desarrollos recientes en la península de Corea pueden verse como parte de un largo proceso histórico de cambios de poder dentro de la región de Asia Oriental, que

se remonta al menos hasta fines del siglo XIX. Estos cambios no solo han alterado la naturaleza de la hegemonía política regional, sino que también han llevado a una remodelación del espacio social en el Este de Asia. Desde esta perspectiva, se puede argumentar que Asia Oriental se encuentra en un punto de inflexión, cuyas implicancias se pueden esbozar de manera general, pero aún no en detalle. Para comprender la naturaleza del punto de inflexión actual, es importante no solo centrarse en las negociaciones entre los Estados Unidos y Corea del Norte, sino verlas en el marco de las relaciones cambiantes entre todos los países de la región.

Palabras clave: península coreana, Estados Unidos, Este de Asia, equilibrio de poder regional, espacio social.

I. Introduction

On 12 June 2018, world attention was riveted by the spectacle of the meeting in Singapore between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un. Just nine months earlier, President Trump had used the occasion of his first address to the United Nations General Assembly to threaten North Korea with ‘total destruction’ if it did not give up its nuclear ambitions; and Kim had responded by describing Trump as ‘mentally deranged’ and threatening to tame him ‘by fire’. And yet here, nine months on, the two leaders were shaking hands and smiling for the cameras in front of an array of flagpoles on which the North Korean flag and the stars and stripes fluttered side by side. Listening to the English language commentary on this event from Australia, I felt that few of the commentators really grasped what a significant occasion this was from the North Korean point of view. In the seventy years since the creation of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in 1948, the United States has never recognised the existence of North Korea as a sovereign nation. For decades, the three successive leaders of North Korea – Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un – have tried by all the means at their disposal to gain a face-to-face meeting with the US President. From Kim Jong Un’s point of view, whatever the ultimate outcome of the meeting, achieving that first handshake in itself was a momentous event.

Trump himself, with typical hubris, went on to hail the event as a turning point for the region: ‘all of Asia is thrilled... If not for me, we would now be at war with North Korea!’ (Wagner, 2018). Other commentators, though, were much more cautious. Many pointed out that the document signed by both leaders was brief and very vague in content. Even the most optimistic have observed that the summit was simply a first step in a promising direction, and that would achieve real historical significance only if North Korea actually

took concrete steps to abandon its nuclear weapons. So far, despite ongoing negotiations and a second summit meeting between the two leaders in February 2019, the steps in this direction have been cautious. Satellite imaging shows that North Korea has been dismantling some of its key nuclear-related sites, including parts of its Sohae Satellite launching station (Bermudez, 2018), but divisions remain over interpretations of ‘denuclearisation’ and over the way in which sanctions relief might be traded for the destruction of nuclear facilities. There is still a long way to go in the denuclearisation process, and the steps taken so far could quite easily be reversed if tensions in the region rose again.

Meanwhile, of course, the US commitment to keeping its side of any deals with North Korea also remains open to question, and indeed the future of the Trump Presidency itself is a matter for debate. It would be rash to attempt to predict where this process will end up. In this paper, rather than looking in detail at the ongoing US-North Korea negotiations or attempting to predict their outcome, I would like to put the whole process in a much wider historical perspective. From this perspective, I want to argue that East Asia is indeed at a crucial turning point, whose implications can be sketched in a broad-brush way, but not defined in detail.

II. The Emergence of Japan’s Regional Dominance

To understand the deep historical background to the events taking place on the Korean Peninsula today, we need to start by thinking about the geopolitics of East Asia. The ‘North Korea problem’ is just part – though a crucial part – of the larger issues of the power balance within East Asia (the area stretching from Siberia in the north to the southern borders of China in south, and including far eastern Russia, China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia and Taiwan). Unlike Western Europe, which is a patchwork of large and small nations that may be reconfigured into many different constellations, East Asia is dominated by two big powers, China and Japan, with Korea sandwiched between them. In modern times, reconfiguring the relationship between the region’s powers has always involved a major regional upheaval, and that upheaval has always centred on the Korean Peninsula. Since the middle of the 19th century, there have been two such upheavals, each of which ushered in a fundamentally new order in the region. Both of these were accompanied by large and devastating ‘Korean Wars’. Now the system is being reconfigured once again. Even a peaceful transformation will have huge implications, not only for East Asia itself, but also for all the countries of the Asia Pacific and for the world.

The first modern reconfiguration of East Asia began with the decline of China and the rise of Japan in the mid-19th century, but the key turning

point in this power shift took the form of two wars fought between 1894 and 1905. These are generally known as ‘the Sino-Japanese War’ (1894-1895) and ‘the Russo-Japanese War’ (1904-1905). However, (as I have suggested elsewhere (Morris-Suzuki 2011, 2018a)) they might better be called ‘the First Korean War’. The two conflicts, in other words, were so closely linked that we can see them as forming a single contest over the balance of power in East Asia. The issue at stake throughout was control of the Korean Peninsula; and the actual fighting occurred in the Korean Peninsula and the adjacent areas of Northeast China. The names that we give to wars have important consequences for our understanding of history. When we speak of ‘the Sino-Japanese War’ and the ‘Russo-Japanese War’, we achieve the curious trick of making Korea vanish from the picture. Many accounts of the conflicts of 1894 to 1905 also adopt a style of writing which not only makes Korea disappear, but also makes much of the civilian suffering caused by the conflict invisible. Military histories of these wars describe armies marching across a terrain which is curiously devoid of people. In other words, they give very little sense of the presence of Korean, Manchurian, Chinese, Russian settler and other communities were devastated by the military events which they describe.

By calling the events of 1894-1905 the ‘First Korean War’, I have sought to put those missing people back into the picture, and also to highlight the historical lineage which links the First Korean War with the Second Korean War, and turn with the events taking place in East Asia today. The First Korean War was an escalation of rising conflicts between China and Japan, both of which had troops stationed in Korea, where they were engaged in political conspiracies to gain control over the government of the Yi Dynasty: then in a state of relative weakness and confusion. This power play centred on the question of who would control Korea, which in turn was the lynchpin determining the relative power of its two larger East Asian neighbours. Japan sent a large contingent of troops to Korea, where they landed at Incheon and at Busan and Wonsan. As they marched north, a short but ferocious battle took place in Pyongyang, which had been heavily fortified by Chinese troops, and which suffered enormous damage. At the start of the battle Pyongyang had about 80,000 inhabitants, and by the end it reportedly had about 15,000, with the rest having fled or been killed (Terry, 1928, p. 755-756).

The fighting between Japanese and Chinese forces occurred alongside, and was integrally connected to, an uprising by a quasi-religious Korean group which opposed the influence of intruding imperial powers. Japanese troops arriving to fight the Chinese suffered heavy casualties in conflicts with Korean insurgent forces (Lone, 1994, p. 133). From Pyongyang, Japanese troops marched north to the border between Korea and China, where a further major battle took place, before crossing into the Shandong Peninsula and engaging Chinese troops in a final decisive confrontation at Wei-Hai-Wei. The war confirmed the loss of China's influence on Korea,

and the irrevocable shift in power from the once-mighty Chinese empire to industrializing Japan. It also gave Japan its first formal foreign colony – Taiwan.

But, to gain international recognition of its dominant place in East Asia, Japan needed not only to demonstrate military superiority over China, but also to win acknowledgment of its new-found dominance from the western powers. And that was still lacking. The European powers, and Russia in particular, still believed that they could keep Japan in place, and Russia (which has a very small strip of land border with Korea) now started to intervene very actively in Korean affairs. The intervention by Russia and other major powers restricted the gains that Japan achieved from its victory over China, and revealed how little the existing great powers were ready to accept a changed balance of power in the region. This became the main bone of contention behind the second phase of conflict, which erupted in 1904. This, in other words, can be seen as stage two of the first Korean War – the ongoing military struggle for Japanese strategic dominance in East Asia. As tensions with Japan rose, Russia, which was ill-prepared for a major military conflict, proposed the division of Korea along the 39th parallel, with the area to the north becoming a ‘neutral zone’ (Menning, 2007, p. 72). This proposal, rejected by Japan, foreshadowed the division one degree further south, which was to occur at the end of the Asia-Pacific War and be reconfirmed by the outcome of the Second Korean War of 1950 to 1953.

The first fighting of this phase of the war again took place off Incheon, where Japanese troops landed in February 1904. Japanese forces then occupied the entire southern half of Korea before marching north, once again capturing Pyongyang. Though this time there was little fighting in Pyongyang itself, the entire population were again reported to have fled the town, returning after the threat of violence had passed (Kinai, 1905, p.103). Korean and Chinese civilians found their villages and farmlands suddenly overwhelmed by waves of Japanese or Russian troops: according to one British observer, they confronted ‘vast bands of armed men who, in seeking shelter unscrupulously turned them out of their homes, plundered their crops and confiscated their food supplies,’ and ‘village after village was wiped out and hundreds of people were cruelly slaughtered’ (Lawton, 1912, p. 236).

Again repeating the pattern of the Sino-Japanese War Japanese forces then pressed on north the Yalu River, which marks the border between Korea and China, where a major battle was fought at the town of Uiju, close to the main crossing point between China and North Korea today. The Battle of Yalu River of April 1904 was a decisive moment in the Russo-Japanese War and a decisive moment in the history of the region. As journalists Dennis and Peggy Warner put it in their well-known 1970s account of the war, Russia raised the white flag on the Yalu at ‘5.30 pm on Sunday, May 1 1904, and the world has

not been the same again'. 'Japan,' they add, 'had now established itself in the eyes of the world as a significant military power. It was no longer a collection of tiny islands inhabited by curious little people, but a new and serious factor in international affairs' (Warner & Warner, 1974, pp. 250-251 and 268).

III. A 'New Far East'

The transformation of East Asia was, of course, not simply a result of the battle or of the war. It was the consequence of much slower and more complex economic, social and political shifts at work across East Asia. But the Battle of the Yalu River, and the First Korean War of which it was a part, did help to determine the *way* in which the transformation was realised. It ensured that Japan's dominance of the region was born of violence, and created in a way that left a profound legacy of unresolved resentments, not least in Korea and north-eastern China, which had unwillingly become the battleground in which the decisive conflicts over the regional and global balance of power were fought out. And Japan's main material trophy from the war was political control over the whole of the Korean Peninsula, which became a Japanese protectorate in 1905 and a fully-fledged colony in 1910.

Shifts in the regional balance of power do not only change the nature of political hegemony in the region. They also reshape social and economic space; and this is particularly important because, as I shall explain later, one of the most significant implications of events on the Korean Peninsula today is the possibility of a similar fundamental reshaping of physical space. Japan's victory over China in 1895 had been described as 'proclaiming to an astonished world the birth of the New Far East', centred no longer on China but on Japan (Diósy, 1898, p.1).

New rail and sea links helped to weave together this vision of an integrated Far East centred on Japan. The Korean and South Manchurian railways, over which Japan had assumed control by 1905, carried foreign visitors on a course linking the southern Korean port of Busan via north-eastern China to the Trans-Siberian Railway. All this was part of a grand vision which, via tunnels on both sides of the world, would (it was dreamed) connect Tokyo to London directly by rail. The First World War and the Russian Revolution helped to ensure that the dream wasn't fully realized, but the railway became an artery conveying nutrients through a newly reshaped region.

The new transportation infrastructure allowed Japan to move into north-eastern China (Manchuria) and start exploiting its rich resources – including coal mines and wide areas of land, which were developed to grow crops like wheat and soy beans to feed Japan's expanding empire. Travellers and tourists from Japan and around the world also made use of the Korean and Manchurian rail networks in large numbers, and sometimes journeyed all

the way across to Europe on the trans-Siberian railway. Japanese shipping lines extended these links to the ports of Japan, and southwards to the British colony of Hong Kong and to Manila, which from 1898 became the administrative centre of the first US colony in Asia: the Philippines. Thomas Cook's tours arrived in Pyongyang for the first time immediately before the Japanese annexation of Korea, and by the start of the 1920s the company was offering well-to-do western travellers a range of Far Eastern tours spanning Japan, China, Manchuria, Korea and the Philippines (Kemp, 1911, pp. 71-71; Busan Geundae Yeoksagwan, 2007). The Japan Tourist Bureau was established in 1912, and two years later opened its first branch office in Manchuria (Young, 1998, p. 260).

The South Manchurian Railway Company, meanwhile, became essentially an arm of government, exerting huge political influence in Northeastern China, and it was a faked 'terrorist attack' on the railway that provided the excuse for Japan to launch a military takeover of Manchuria in 1931 and create the puppet state of Manchukuo. As one employee of the South Manchurian Railway Company put it, 'Japanese imperialism in its advance into Manchuria... chose to assume the form of a railroad company' (Itō, 1988, p. 5). But the network was also used by those who opposed Japan's expanding power in the region, including Koreans who fled by rail across the border into China, where some became independence guerrillas fighting a rear-guard action against Japanese colonial rule in Korea.

IV. The Second Korean War and the Creation of the Cold War Order

The Japan-centred East Asian order which had taken shape from the end of the nineteenth century was dramatically overturned in 1945, when Japan lost the Asia-Pacific War. Between 1945 and the early 1950s, East Asia was in turmoil, but out of this chaos a new order emerged, in which Japan's power within the region was reinstated, although within a radically altered framework. Once again, the new order that was established in the region was confirmed through violent conflict, and once again the conflict was fought over and in the Korean Peninsula.

Korean nationalists had been struggling for independence from Japan for decades: some (like Kim Il Sung) were engaged in guerrilla warfare in Manchuria; others were involved in political action based in China, where a Korean provisional government had been established in 1919. Among the participants in the provisional government was Syngman Rhee (Yi Seung-man), who later sought refuge in the US, from where he campaigned for independence for decades, before returning to the Korean Peninsula with US forces after Korea's liberation from Japanese rule, and becoming President of

South Korea in 1948. Others independence fighters again had been engaged in underground action within Korea itself.

But hardly anyone, either in Japan or in Korea, had foreseen the drastic collapse of the Japanese empire in August 1945, so the various Korean independence groups were ill-prepared to take over control of the government. Some groups in Korea did immediately start to set up Independence Preparation Committees in their local areas, but meanwhile, unknown to them, outsiders had been making decisions about their fate. Wartime negotiations between the USA and the Soviet Union (who were then allies) had decided that after the war Korea was to be placed under a joint trusteeship controlled by the US and the Soviet Union for a period of time until it was 'ready' for independence, but there been no clear agreement about how long the trusteeship would last or how it would work in practice. As the Japanese empire collapsed, on 10 August two young US officers with no expertise on Korea (one of whom, Dean Rusk, later became US Secretary of State) were asked to define the dividing line between the US and Soviet control zones in Korea. Notoriously, they took a map from National Geographic magazine and ruled a line along the 38th parallel, mainly because this allowed the principal town, Seoul, to be in the American zone (Cummings, 1981, pp. 118-122). This set the stage for the violence of the region's second major transition.

There were deep political divisions within and well as between North and South Korea. With Soviet backing, communists led by Kim Il Sung quickly asserted authoritarian control in the North, while in the South, Syngman Rhee proved bellicose and domestically unpopular, and a US presence was seen as necessary both to bolster his support and to restrain his enthusiasm for launching an assault on the emerging Communist state on the northern side of the dividing line. Meanwhile, the victory of Communist forces in China altered the whole equation, creating a much larger and more formidable Communist presence in East Asia, and persuading the US that its presence was necessary to prevent the 'Red Wave' from sweeping though South Korea and into Japan.

So the Korean Peninsula came to be the front line again, this time in the emerging Cold War order in East Asia, which ranged the Soviet Union and China on one side against pro-US nations and the US itself: now a major force in the region because of its occupation of Japan and the southern half of Korea. In June 1950, a North Korean incursion across the 38th Parallel launched the Second Korean War, and this quickly turned into a world war in miniature, concentrated with horrible ferocity on the confined space of the Korean Peninsula. In addition to Korean forces, troops from nineteen countries fought in Korea: on the Northern side, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, and on the Southern, the seventeen countries grouped into the UN Command, which included the US, Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Canada,

Turkey, Greece, Thailand and Ethiopia. The strategy and the technologies of war were new, but the terrain was familiar.

North Korean forces launched a rapid strike south, which brought them to within fifty kilometres of the southernmost major city of Busan. In response, US forces then staged their famous landing at Incheon (where Japanese troops had come ashore in both 1894 and 1904). From there, US and other United Nations troops pushed north taking Pyongyang in November 1950, and slogging towards the Yalu River, along much the same course as the one taken by Japanese forces in 1894 and 1904. But their approach to the northern border triggered China's entry into the war, leading to a further phase of conflict in which North Korean and Chinese forces once again pushed south over the 38th Parallel, briefly recapturing Seoul in the early part of 1951.

While Seoul was repeatedly pounded by ground forces, Pyongyang suffered less damage during the ground battles of 1950. The real destruction came from the air. In the summer of 1952, massive aerial attacks were launched: on 11 July alone, US, South Korea, British and Australian pilots flew 1,254 sorties against Pyongyang, 'dropping bombs and 23,000 gallons of napalm on the inhabitants'. Attacks were repeated throughout July and August until 'the Americans decided that there were too few targets left to justify a continuation of the bombardment' (Lee, 2001, p. 88). In mid-1953 an armistice was finally signed at Panmunjom between the UN side and North Korea and its allies (the USSR and PRC). The South Korean government refused to sign: so, to this day, not only has no peace treaty been signed to conclude the war, but also the two Koreas remain technically in a state of war.

There are several important aspects of the Korean War that are often forgotten. One is the fact that South Korea never signed the Panmunjom armistice. Another is the remarkable fact is that it was a war between North Korea and its communist allies China and the Soviet Union on the one hand, and on the other hand South Korea and the United Nations. This is the only time when the United Nations itself became a combatant in war, not a peacekeeper. Most of the 'UN' forces were of course American, but numerous 15 other countries – including Britain, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Turkey, Ethiopia and Colombia – also took part in the war as combatants. This fact helps to explain how, from the North Korean perspective, the Korean War came to be remembered as an event when most of their small country was forced to defend itself from attack by most of the rest of the world.

The Korean War was also very much an East Asian War. About half a million Chinese died fighting in Korea, perhaps the most famous being Mao An-Ying, the son of Mao Tse-Tung. The Korean War broke out only just after the Chinese Civil War ended in 1949 — in fact, there were minor skirmishes between communist and nationalist Chinese still going on at the time when the Korean War broke out, and this meant that the Korean War placed a massive

burden on a still war-devastated China. For five years after the end of the war, some 300,000 Chinese ‘volunteers’ remained in North Korea, not only as a military presence but also providing a workforce for the tasks of postwar construction. This history helps to explain the intense but complex relationship which still exists between China and North Korea. On the other hand, the withdrawal left North Korea without a foreign military presence, while tens of thousands of US troops complete with nuclear weapons remained in the South: a fact which helps to explain North Korea’s sometimes paranoid obsession with security.

Japan, too, was much more deeply involved in the war than is generally known. The best-known consequence of the Second Korean War was the vital role of war procurements in boosting Japan’s miraculous postwar economic growth, prompting Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru (with inimitable insensitivity) to call the Korean War ‘a gift from the gods’. It is difficult to piece together a clear picture of Japanese involvement in the war, because the story is complex, written records are fragmented, and some documents on the subject still seem to be classified. The best estimate is that about 8,000 Japanese recruits, mostly seamen, were sent to the war zone in roles that included minesweeping (around 1,200 people, many of them former members of the imperial navy); manning landing vessels, including the vessels for the Incheon landing (probably about 2,000 people); crewing transport vessels used to take military supplies to the front (maybe around 2,000-3,000 workers); and performing dock labour and maintenance tasks in Korea (Ishimaru, 2008). The workers who performed these last tasks were kept semi-incarcerated within UN bases or more often on ships moored off ports such as Busan and Incheon (Asahi Shinbun, 1953, p. 3). Japanese companies also manufactured important munitions for the war, including napalm. A very small number of Japanese people who had been left behind in Manchuria after the war also fought with Chinese forces on the North Korean side in the war (Morris-Suzuki, 2018b).

The Korean War also helped to determine the place of Japan in the postwar East Asian order. The San Francisco Peace Treaty and Japan’s Security Agreement with the United States were signed at the height of the war, and, partly as a result of this, the San Francisco Treaty excluded both China and the Soviet Union. Indeed, in 2019 Japan’s Abe government is still in the process of trying to negotiate the completion of a post-Pacific War peace settlement with Russia. In this Cold War system cemented by the Second Korean War, Japan again emerged as a major regional power, but only by virtue of its alliance to the United States: the new force in regional affairs. While Japan emerged as the region’s economic superpower, China remained economically relatively weak until the late 1980s, but (unlike Japan) possessed very large armed forces and substantial international political influence. The Soviet Union was also a force

in the region, though one increasingly estranged from its erstwhile ally, China. This uneasy but relatively stable system persisted until the 1990s, when the economic rise of China, the collapse of the Soviet Union and crisis and famine in North Korea signalled the start of a new regional transition.

The collapse of the Japanese empire in 1945 brought with it an abrupt disintegration of the links which had connected East Asia throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. The forces of division that tore the region apart were, indeed, far more complex and profound than those which divided postwar Europe. Europe was divided by a single 'Iron Curtain' separating West from East, but on the western side of the Curtain cross-border movement was relatively easy and cultural communication flourished. In Asia the fissures were much more complex. The 38th parallel became just one of many Cold War dividing lines, although it has proved the most enduring. There was also, for example, the line dividing Japan from its neighbour Russia (then the Soviet Union). Then there was the Sino-Soviet split of 1960, which created a divide right across the middle of the East Asian region. Meanwhile, even in the non-communist parts of the region, security fears intensified by the Cold War created borders that isolated national societies and divided families. It was, for example, difficult for Koreans to travel between Japan and South Korea before the normalisation of relations between the two countries in 1965, and indeed remained difficult for many people until the democratisation of South Korea in the 1980s.

The railway that once connected the southern tip of Korea to Manchuria and Siberia and ultimately western Europe now came to a full stop half way up the Korean Peninsula, and as tensions between China and the Soviet Union increased in the 1960s, the border between those two countries also became virtually impassable. In addition to the impassable dividing line between North and South Korea, there were a multitude of other lines that were equally impossible to cross. For example, to the north of Japan, the Soviet Union occupied the Kurile Islands and the southern half of the island of Sakhalin, both of which had formerly been incorporated into the Japanese Empire. The southern tip of Sakhalin is visible from the north of Japan's northernmost island, Hokkaido, but until the 1990s it was basically impossible to travel between the two islands. I first went to Sakhalin just as this border had opened up following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, and on the boat going there with me was a Japanese man who said that he lived for forty in a house from where he could see Sakhalin from his window every day, but until the 1990s the idea of going there had seemed as remote as the idea of going to the moon.

On the other hand, economic, cultural and transport links between the United States on the one hand and Japan, South Korea and Taiwan flourished. The US truly became a presence in this part of East Asia, reshaping the culture

and society of those countries. This is even reflected in the fact, for example, that in Japan towns and cities on the Pacific side of the nation, facing towards the US, grew and flourished more rapidly than towns and cities on the western side, facing Asia.

V. The Third Transformation

For about the past ten years, I have been arguing that East Asia is now in the midst of the third major turning point in its modern history, but that this third transformation is still incomplete, and will not be complete until some resolution to the crisis on the Korean Peninsula is achieved. From the late 1980s onward, as the Cold War in Europe came to an end, the Cold War in East Asia also began to thaw, with the opening of China to the outside world and the collapse of the Soviet Union. But as long as the Cold War divide across the Korean Peninsula persisted, this thaw remained partial and fragile, always in danger of sliding back into Cold War or, worse still, even into hot war.

In the early years of the 21st century there were significant moves towards a resolution of the Korean crisis under the so-called ‘sunshine policy’ of the late South Korean president Kim Dae-Jung. This led to new economic connections between North and South Korea, including a major joint tourism site at Mt. Kumgang, just on the northern side of the dividing line between the two Koreas, and the large collaborative industrial site at Kaesong, also just inside North Korea. But then, with the failure of efforts to negotiate an end to North Korea’s nuclear missile program and a change of governments in South Korea, these initiatives were reversed, and the freeze in relations between the two halves of the peninsula returned.

Meanwhile, other forces were transforming East Asia: most notably, the rise of China to become the world’s second largest economy and a major global political power. The pendulum that shifted leadership in the region from China to Japan at the start of the twentieth century seemed to be swinging back towards China at the start of the twenty-first century. But I have long argued that it is the fate of the Korean Peninsula that will determine whether this third transformation is a largely peaceful one, or whether, like earlier transformations, it occurs with the devastating violence of war.

If we look at the events of 2018-2020 in this long-term historical perspective, I think that we can see aspects of the transformation that tend to be neglected by most mainstream media discourse. The media focus has been very largely on the relationship between the US and North Korea – particularly the personal relationship between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un – and on the question of North Korean nuclear missiles and denuclearisation. Even when the meeting with South Korean leader Moon Jae-In and the North Korean leader briefly hit the headlines, the media commentary still focused on

the question of whether or not this was going to lead to North Korean denuclearisation.

Of course, this is an important question, but focusing on this exclusively diverts attention from other very important shifts that are taking place in the region. In the first place, it is important to remember that the recent signs of opening from North Korea are directed not just towards the US but equally importantly towards South Korea, towards China – with whom the North Korean government had had a very bad relationship since the death of Kim Jong Il and the succession of Kim Jong Un in 2011 – and towards Russia. Whatever happens in the Trump-Kim relationship, really important moves continue, often behind the scenes, between South and North Korea and between China and North Korea. Recent Russia-North Korea negotiations have been very little reported in the western media, but are also important. Russia has long had a relatively good relationship with North Korea, and the two countries have a crucial small strip of border at Rajin-Sonbong (Rason), which is a North Korean special economic zone. Until very recently, the development of the zone and of cross border trade has been limited by sanctions of the political tensions of the region, but in 2018 and 2019 there were growing signs of cross border cooperation, including plans to build a new rail bridge and Internet connection between the two countries.

From the point of view of these two governments, although the nuclear issue is of course very important, other issues are almost equally important. Kim Jong Un's strategy is to try to open and transform his country economically while still retaining an authoritarian political grip — following the model of countries like Vietnam. Already, considerable signs of transformation are taking place in the North Korean economy, though this is largely concentrated in the capital, Pyongyang, meaning that economic growth and development is being accompanied by widening wealth gaps. In today's North Korea, as Ruediger Frank puts it 'access to almost anything is guaranteed — as long as one has enough money' (Frank, 2018).

The difference between US and South Korean perceptions of change on the Korean Peninsula was very interestingly illustrated by the speech that Moon Jae-In gave on Korean Liberation Day, 15 August, in 2018. Although he of course also stressed the importance of progress in denuclearising the Korean Peninsula, Moon's focus was equally on economic cooperation between the two Koreas, and the main new initiative highlighted in his speech was the reopening of transport links to reconnect the networks severed by the division of Korea. Interestingly, Moon likened this to the processes that initiated the creation of the European Union, and went on to present the thaw in relations with the North as the initial step towards the creation of a new East Asian community:

It is a goal to hold ground breaking ceremonies within this year for the reconnection of railroads and roads as agreed in the Panmunjom Declaration. The reconnection of railroads and roads is the beginning of mutual prosperity on the Korean Peninsula.

The European Coal and Steel Community was created in 1951 by six European countries with the goal of preventing wars, establishing peace and rebuilding the economy. The community later gave birth to the European Union.

At Yongsan, once the starting point of railroads between Seoul and Sinuiju and between Seoul and Wonsan, I propose the creation of the East Asian Railroad Community today, encompassing six Northeast Asian countries and the United States. The community will expand the horizon of the Korean economy to the northern part of the continent and become the main artery of mutual prosperity in Northeast Asia. It will then lead to the creation of East Asian energy and economic communities. Moreover, it will initiate a Northeast Asian multilateral peace and security system. (Moon, 2018).

This vision of a reshaped space of East Asia also connects, of course, the major Chinese initiative of recent years, the One Belt One Road scheme, which seeks to open up overland connections between East Asia, Central Asia and Europe, creating a 'New Silk Road'.

This reflects a dream that has existed in Korea (both North and South) for decades. Whether it will be realised remains to be seen, and will of course be influenced by the outcome of the ongoing negotiations between the US and North Korea. The Trump presidency, I would suggest, marks a significant acceleration of the long-term decline of US influence in the East Asian region, while the central roles of China and South Korea in engagement with North Korea are part of a long term reshaping of the economic and political geography of the region. This reshaping is seeing a reconnection of severed land bridges linking the various countries of East Asia, and a realignment of economic connections across East Asia's borders. The problems to be faced are enormous, of course. North Korea remains a country with an extremely repressive dictatorial regime, and shows no signs of any shift towards democratisation. How far economic opening can be achieved without political opening, or even regime change, remains to be seen. The turning point also poses challenges for other countries, not least Japan. Throughout the Cold War period, Japan took relatively low profile in international politics in the region, following the political lead of the US while focusing on developing its economic strength. Now, after more than two decades of low economic growth, and with America's stance on international affairs becoming increasingly erratic, Japan faces the challenge of engaging creatively with the rapidly changing order in the region.

When Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump met for their second summit in Hanoi on 27 and 28 February, expectations were higher than they had been at the time of the 2018 Singapore Summit, and many commentators were expecting some form of ‘peace declaration’ to emerge from the meeting. In fact, though, the summit wound up ahead of schedule, with no joint statement being issued. The lack of visible outcome from the much-heralded event provoked widespread cynicism and multiple analyses of ‘what went wrong’. Yet, as some of the best informed observers noted, the dialogue continues, with each side gradually gaining a better understanding of the other’s negotiating strategies (Frank, 2019). A breakthrough remains tantalisingly close and yet still beyond reach.

East Asia, I believe, is at a turning point, and events on the Korean Peninsula are the pivot – but this turning point is not all about the meetings between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, nor is it all about the nuclear issue. Rather, a much wider set of forces is gathering momentum. This set of forces embraces all the countries of the region and involves trade, transport and communications as well as strategic weaponry. The reshaping of the region is underway, though the outlines of the new order that will emerge from that reshaping remain hazy.

VI. References

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