

A HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE: UNDERSTANDING CHINA AND NORTH KOREA

Interview with Professor John Delury
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PEAR: *How would you describe China's current efforts to engage countries in East Asia using traditional bilateral relationships?*

Delury: Relative to the United States, what is noticeable is that China has very few bilateral negotiating partners, so they do not play a major role in how it conducts foreign policy at this point. North Korea and Pakistan are an exception to the rule. The contrast is sort of interesting between Pakistan and North Korea. I think that this is very significant for the future of international cooperation and potential conflict in Asia. There is real potential in the China-Pakistan relationship and alliance to continue to develop from what are right now pretty strong foundations, especially given how rocky the relationship is between the United States and Pakistan.

When I was in China this summer, it was interesting talking to Chinese foreign policy people who described the way they are received in Pakistan and the good feeling that exists towards the Chinese in Pakistan. China's relationship with Pakistan is really strong and has real potential to develop. This is in contrast to North Korea where, historically speaking, there is a peak in China-North Korea relations. I do not anticipate relations getting stronger and closer. I think we are seeing about where it maxes out. It has reached this point, because North Korea's relations with everyone else are so bad. There has been such a dramatic deterioration in inter-Korean relations that nothing is happening with the United States as well as ten years, more or less, of things going in a very bad direction with Japan. There have been some improvements with Russia but, overall, North Korea is coming off a very bad period with Russia. So, again this is where bilateral relations between China and North Korea will peak, because from the North Korean perspective they do not want to get cornered into a situation where the only option they have is Beijing, which is almost the case now. But I think the trajectory is that they will eventually move out of that.

PEAR: *What is the effect of China's inability and lack of desire to negotiate traditional bilateral relations?*

Delury: I think it is very much to their advantage that they do not engage in bilateral relations. If you look at the United States, it does not always help. It is easy to get bogged down in bilateral commitments. China, under the current conditions, is able to stay free from getting tied down. Historically speaking, if we go way back, you could make an argument that it is a deep legacy in traditional Chinese foreign policy, a distinct feature of China as the center of relations when it was the dominant power in East Asia. It did not need bilateral alliances. Under the tributary system, all other countries gravitated towards China. Under this system, China acted more as the center in the regional network of countries rather than committing itself to other countries.

PEAR: *As a historian, are there any historical examples of China engaging in bilateral relationships with regional countries?*

Delury: Imperial China had the closest thing to what we could call a bilateral security alliance with Korea. That is certainly a way you can look at the

Imjin War in the 1590s. There were a lot of reasons for China to respond to the Japanese invasion. Part of it was that Korea was a kind of lynchpin to the highest ranking in the hierarchy of China's relationships with all its bordering countries and groups.

PEAR: *Who is the modern-day lynchpin? Would you say it is still Korea?*

Delury: Well, that is an interesting thing. There is a kind of historical logic to the fact that Korea, which happens to be North Korea, is the only alliance it has because that was sort of the case in the imperial and late-imperial period. And the clearest proof of that is the war in the 1590s. It's an interesting kind of historical echo in a way.

PEAR: *How can the China-North Korean relationship be described in relation to the China-North Korean alliance?*

Delury: The issue of the alliance is interesting in terms of Chinese foreign policy discourse and Chinese discussion about its North Korea relationship, among other issues, where there is fairly open debate and a range of opinions. Not Chinese government officials, but prominent foreign policy experts in China, give very different statements about this alliance. Very recently, a prominent foreign policy person said the alliance is just on paper and China will not act upon it. Whereas, I've heard other equally eminent foreign policy or military spokespeople say absolutely it is a treaty and China is obligated by it. This debate gets into a side issue, but an important one: How do you interpret Chinese foreign policy pronouncements? What has authority and what does not? The China-North Korea relationship is a very interesting one to study because it is particularly open. So it is a good kind of test case for people trying to figure out how to read China for them to track what different parts of their system are saying about this alliance and how binding it is. It is a very open issue.

PEAR: *Where do you see the China-North Korea alliance in the near future?*

Delury: My sense is the alliance signed in 1961 is legally binding, and the Chinese and the government view it as such. I think it is something that could potentially be altered somehow as part of a momentous project for a peace settlement to the Korean War. But I think the treaty alliance will be left untouched and could persist between China and North Korea. The very strong bilateral relationship

they have now, I think, could stay at this level for quite some time. But again, in contrast with Pakistan, there is not a lot more room for growth and taking on added economic and strategic dimensions. I do not see that room for growth with North Korea. I think it is as fully developed as it could get.

PEAR: *Both South Korea and the United States will hold national elections in late 2012 and stand to adopt policy changes on North Korea. How do these elections in particular affect Pyongyang's pace of power transition? Do the relatively short election cycles of the democracies that North Korea deals with have any significant effects on its foreign policy toward them?*

Delury: That is a good question and I will address the last part first. There were major transitions taking place within each country taking part in the Six Party Talks between 2007 and 2008. There was a huge change in South Korea. Japan was in political flux, with its sixth or seventh prime minister in five years and a government that had made overtures to North Korea was replaced by a hardline administration. Obama entered office after the United States was consumed with its own election. Russia and China too were experiencing their own changes. These factors combined, moving parts in the process so to speak, were critical in the unraveling of the Six Party Talks. North Korean domestic issues like succession and Kim Jong-il's probable stroke joined these very complex dynamics and contributed to this constant instability that threatens to unravel any deal. That is a major political and structural problem for the Six Party Talks.

Interestingly from that perspective, North Korea and China are the most stable in terms of their capacity to maintain policies on the issues at hand. Russia is a less critical player, but it shares this stability. Nonetheless, I think North Korea has learned to remain skeptical on whether the domestic politics in its partner countries or those across the negotiating table will allow this deal to go through. That effect is now combined with a consciously lame-duck Lee administration in South Korea not pushing hard to get a deal. At present, the Lee administration's deliberations on whether or not to meet for summits or make any movements toward North Korea at all are weakened. The most important election in 2012 will therefore be here in South Korea and we will see how citizens vote on platforms with different approaches to inter-Korean relations. I think that is going to be a key driver, so the North Koreans are watching it very closely to figure out how to respond and maximize their own interests.

PEAR: *That is interesting and worth noting that North Korea's foreign policy seems to be very reactive and contingent upon external forces.*

Delury: I would not take it that far because they also take actions and make statements that throw the other parties off balance and thus drive the process at key moments. When they sense that they are the fundamentally weaker party at certain levels they will sometimes throw the stronger parties off balance in order to prevent losing control of the agenda, pacing and momentum. Therefore I would not say it is a fundamentally reactive policy, but it is responsive to the domestic politics of the key countries and North Korea pays attention to those trends in their own diplomacy.

PEAR: *Do you believe they take advantage of these trends in order to exert a certain control?*

Delury: Everyone at the table is very much acting out of national interests. When the process works well each country's negotiators are figuring out ways to align their interests while still maximizing them. When the process goes poorly and they cannot find any alignment they pursue their own interests regardless of the implications. Fundamentally they will look for ways to maximize their own interests.

One very interesting view in the debate on North Korea-US relations is that the North Koreans misread an Obama administration that came in willing to negotiate in good faith, move forward and follow through on commitments. This view holds that the North Koreans were impatient and then decided to challenge if not insult Obama with missile tests and then nuclear tests. In sum, North Korea misread the United States and missed an opportunity to negotiate for things in its own interests. I am slightly skeptical of that view but it is commonly held and debated.

PEAR: *Secretary Clinton recently stated that talking with North Korea for the sake of talking is not effective diplomacy. Do you agree with that sentiment?*

Delury: No, I do not. This is an unusual case in diplomacy and talking in and of itself can be positive. The level of alienation here is profound, as is the culture gap. There is much unresolved history. Talking therefore, especially over time, can contribute to each side's ability to trust the other, identify needs and see the nuances of opinions. Before trust comes clear understanding. Trust

can be established if proper decisions are made after the establishment of that understanding. Trust is not guaranteed to be reached and it may take years of work, but talking is part of the process. Talking alone is not going to solve all of these issues, especially the nuclear issue which is key from the US perspective, but it will help. I therefore do not agree with Secretary Clinton's statement. Talking in this case does have intrinsic value.

PEAR: *During the Sunshine Period Policy, do you believe that cooperation took place at a greater rate than it currently is now?*

Delury: Yes, at least from an empirical point of view. Especially by the end of 2007, there was a quantitative, probably reaching qualitative, shift in the order of degree of contact between the two Koreas. A lot was going on at many different levels between the two governments and by NGOs. Now, all that has stopped because of a policy change and because of complicated events. That it is not one party is to blame has just made it worse, so much so that it is now to the point where there is so little contact. Now there is movement here in South Korea toward opening up channels a little bit more. But I think it is probably right to say it is lukewarm. I do not think given everything that has happened, and since this administration needs to keep its integrity, it would not be helpful for them to suddenly alter their stance drastically. There has been quite a dramatic change from five years ago until now in inter-Korean contact and exchange in cooperation in the economic sphere, the cultural sphere, in people-to-people contact and exchange and humanitarian cooperation.

PEAR: *Do you feel the relationship between the two Koreas would be inhibited or benefited if international powers remained alongside instead of integrated into the negotiation and cooperative mechanisms between them?*

Delury: I think the best scenario here, from the perspective of how to cooperate and work ourselves out of this quagmire, is driven by two centers: an inter-Korea dynamic led by Seoul and inter-Korean dynamic not led by the US and China. In Seoul and Pyongyang, there is a consensus forming on both sides that they want to seriously begin a process of reintegration. There still exists enough of a foundational consensus that serious negotiations could resume and in the future things could look quite different from the way they look now, which is pretty bleak. Whatever the outlook, re-starts of inter-Korea negotiations is not just a

pipe dream. Obviously, it is a very tangled process. The best driver here is the two Koreas leading the process and China and the United States, the two main interested great powers, taking their cues from a positive inter-Korean dynamic. But in the situation like the current one, where inter-Korean relations are frozen or stalled or conflictual - however you want to describe it - I think it is useful for non-government groups and international groups including the interested great powers to do what they can to ameliorate the situation and encourage cooperation. I am probably in a minority school of Americans who actually think and interpret Chinese diplomacy to be pursuing a useful or helpful policy for the last few years in keeping doors open for negotiation with North and South Korea. I also think that the United States can play the role of mitigating the negative side effects of the deteriorating inter-Korean relations.

PEAR: *We are going to move onto China now. Do you agree with analysts' assessments that North Koreans' increased trips abroad, specifically to China, signals a desire for increased economic interactions with regional actors?*

Delury: Yes, I think I am one of those analysts. I think it is a very positive trend right now that North Korea is showing an appetite for going abroad and increasing their exchange and cooperation and it is not limited to China by any means. It is even happening with the United States and South Korea, which is positive. The widest door open is China since they share the border and have economic projects that are mutually beneficial. Again, from this perspective of international cooperation, it is a real phenomenon. The trips are sometimes dismissed as a North Korean going abroad to get much needed hard currency, but I think this is flawed reasoning. Yes, of course, they need hard currency. They have major economic problems, which they are aware of, and getting hard currency is part of the solution. But it is only one part. A lot of the things that are happening with China that can be described as development-assistance oriented or development-cooperation types of projects. These are significant developments and are important to watch and encourage.

PEAR: *From a realist perspective, some might say that increasing economic GDP in North Korea is basically funding their military might. Would you agree with this assumption?*

Delury: I think it is important to consider that there may be certain types of cooperative activities you would not want to do, because they would not pass a test of saying “Now wait a second, is this directly contributing to North Korea’s military capabilities or military assets?” That is more the test I would apply rather than viewing it as everything is fungible and any support it gets, such as a bag of rice, goes to the military. I think it is an important concern when an enemy country is providing some kind of humanitarian assistance to its enemy. This is the situation you have with the United States and North Korea. These two countries fought a war and never signed a peace treat; they just have an armistice. They are fundamentally enemies. It is understandable that when one enemy grants assistance to the other it has needs for assurance that it is not just providing guns to its enemy.

There are workarounds to the problem of food aid being diverted to the military. One example is the type of foodstuff provided. I have heard humanitarian aid experts advise giving corn instead of rice, because it is assured it will go to people in need, as elites do not want to eat corn. I think it is fine to consider these things. I also think you have to be realistic about the issue and recognize that there is going to be some diversion, so you have to at some point be decisive and say are we going to work with this government, this country, its power structure and its elites and try to move it toward cooperation and peace or not. You have to decide whether to accept some diversion or simply cut off all aid and hope that convinces the ruling party to reform itself or collapse. This is the kind of fundamental decision you have to make.

PEAR: *Where do you think North and South Korea stand on reunification, considering that each government has its own vested interests?*

Delury: I do not think there is a simple answer to it. I will focus on what is perception. Obviously, it is some level of guesswork. We can find government positions articulated with authority in each country, but a common-sense credibility check and talking to a wider set of people, both elites and average people, reveal really complex views. Of course non-North Koreans have very limited access to those conversations and insights so that really constrains our ability to know. In South Korea, where it is an open society, you see there is a

huge spread of opinion. I think there is a lot of that in North Korea as well. The bottom line is that the overall picture is very ambivalent.

For example, one piece of ambivalence here in South Korea is found in the perceived economic implications of reunification. Understandably, many Koreans are sensitive about where and how to have that kind of conversation, because they feel a much deeper obligation towards shared “Korean-ness” and uniting the divided families. This sentiment is not limited to the southern half of the peninsula. I think enough North Koreans, elites or not, know enough about South Korea that they have concerns too about what are the economic implications of these different pathways to reunification. The first group of North Koreans who settled in South Korea – Seoul or elsewhere – is roughly 20,000. The difficulties many of them have economically can be assumed to make its way back to North Korea. I do not think they are oblivious to how mixed the experiences have been just in sheer economic terms for North Koreans who arrived in the land of milk and money in the south. Overall, there seems to be a deep, fundamental and powerful ideological, ethnic and ultimately family based commitment to one Korea. Certainly in terms of propaganda, ideology, values and norms, the emphasis on reunification is all there. But beyond this “base,” there is a lot of ambivalence and a lot of complexity in how people see what this would really mean for them as individuals, as families and as an elites.

In the very long run of history, I am sort of an optimist that the two Koreas can and will reunify – in whatever way, hopefully peaceful. The states and societies on both sides of the DMZ retain the commitment to one Korea. It is not like in Taiwan where there is a significant part of the population that really does want autonomy. I think Taiwan will reunify too, but I think the pro-reunification sentiment is just much stronger here. For a non-Asian comparison, compare the Korean situation to a case like Ireland. In Northern Ireland you have a large percentage of the population that has lived there for hundreds of years and feel that they are subjects of and loyal citizens to Great Britain. You don’t have that in Korea. You basically have two populations that in their heart, at the end of the day, see it as one country and, historically speaking, that is incredibly important. **PEAR**