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East Asia

The Korean crisis, geopolitical instability and nuclear proliferation

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The United States has gone back on the offensive in East Asia during the Korean crisis; as for China, it has temporarily lost the initiative. US imperialism is far from winning the game, but it has scored significant points whose scope affects the entire region – and beyond, especially because of the acceleration of the nuclear arms race that it induces. The geopolitical power relations are constantly evolving in this part of the world

Long announced, the repositioning of the United States on the Asia Pacific “pivot” did not really take place under the Obama presidency. Donald Trump has begun to disengage from this key region, withdrawing from free trade agreements under negotiation (the Transpacific Partnership – TPP) and thus leaving the field open to China, which is promoting, with some success, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

During the Korean crisis, Donald Trump took the initiative, this time on the military level, where US supremacy is most overwhelming. His character is imponderable, and his way of abusing Twitter and invective is both disturbing and laughable. The cockfight between Trump and Kim, however, should not hide the point: the US offensive is serious, sustained and beginning to have profound consequences.

A conflictual equilibrium point had developed in East Asia. Beijing had the initiative in the South China Sea thanks to its economic weight and military occupation of the maritime area. Washington had the upper hand in the North thanks to its network of bases and its more or less subordinate allies (South Korea, Japan). Russia, although a Siberian power, was kept at the margins.

Such an equilibrium could only be temporary. In the South, Washington has sent the 7th Fleet to the edge of artificial islands built by China, while in the north, Beijing has sent planes and ships to challenge Japanese claims on the micro-archipelago of Senkaku / Diaoyu, thereby testing the determination of the US. This unstable equilibrium has now been broken by the extent of US intervention on the Korean issue, but also by a wake-up call from the Pentagon in the Philippines.

The deployment of the US offensive

Economic sanctions have not, until now, forced the North Korean leadership to bend or opened a crisis of the regime. Washington has consistently underestimated Pyongyang's capacity for resilience. During the 1950-1954 Korean conflict, the United States reduced the North to dust and committed multiple war crimes. The people have not forgotten and, although they live in great poverty, fear above all another devastating aggression. A privileged social elite has emerged and modernized, providing a social base for autocratic power – which has expanded by allowing market relations to develop in the pores of the planned economy. Ethno-identity nationalism is an effective ideological cement. A flawless preventive repression prohibits the emergence of an alternative within the regime itself.

The fact that previous sanctions have not succeeded does not of course mean that a break point will not be reached tomorrow. This is one of the “open” questions posed by the evolution of the situation.

The seventh series of sanctions adopted by the UN on August 5, 2017 aims to deprive the regime of one billion dollars (850 million euros) of annual revenues from exports. It prohibits the creation of any new joint venture between foreign and North Korean companies; stops any additional investment in existing ones; increases quotas on North

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Korean workers abroad; bans from the ports of all countries North Korean ships which violate UN resolutions; and freezes the assets of Pyongyang's foreign trade bank.

On September 11, 2017 a new set of sanctions was adopted by the UN Security Council including a partial and progressive embargo on oil and its derivatives (total on natural gas). This time, with few exceptions, all joint ventures with North Korean companies are prohibited and existing ones must be closed within one hundred and twenty days. Washington is taking action against banks.

As for cyberattack, under Obama, an electronic warfare program was set up, notably to sabotage the North Korean nuclear programme. It is possible that a number of "misses" (defective missile launches and so on) can be explained as a result, but this has not prevented considerable progress in the development of North Korean capabilities.

Military pressure has been constantly maintained by Washington against North Korea, particularly through the major naval manoeuvres conducted jointly with the South Korean Army each year. A South Korean elite unit is going to be formed with the mandate to assassinate Kim Jong-un. This pressure has been steadily reinforced with the setting up of an underwater base on Jeju Island, the airlift of an aircraft carrier, the deployment of Thaad missile batteries, and finally the flyover by bombers of the North Korean coastal zone, something which had not happened since the 1950s.

The multifaceted offensive pursued by the United States has only confirmed, in the eyes of the North Korean regime, that its survival depended on its ability to be a nuclear nuisance. It has not bent. However, Washington's policy has already borne fruit in South Korea, Japan, China, the Philippines, and more generally in the Asian geopolitical space.

South Korea is a keystone of the regional system for the United States. However, the election of May 9, 2017 was a very serious setback for Donald Trump. Following a huge mobilization of citizens, occupying public space, remarkable in its scope and duration, the previous regime (radical right, heir to the dictatorships of yesteryear) was defeated at the polls. The population has given much more importance to domestic issues (corruption scandals, repression and so on) than to regional military tensions. The warlike policy of the United States was in its eyes the business of Trump, not theirs.

The new president, Moon Jae-in, belongs to a rather important political movement in South Korea that does not break with the canons of neoliberalism, but attaches great importance to the national question, namely the reunification of the country, particularly by way of negotiations (his party is classified as "centre left"). Moon had opposed the accelerated deployment of Thaad missile batteries on South Korean soil and, since his election, he has advocated opening a dialogue with Pyongyang. This was met with a brutal dismissal from Kim Jong-un, which caused his diplomatic initiative to lose all credit. In these conditions and facing the spiral of provocations and counter-provocations, both nuclear and military, between Kim and Trump, he is partially back on-side.

Hostility to the US aggression policy is likely to remain deep in the South Korean population. President Moon has just decided on humanitarian aid to the North's population of \$ 8 billion; a gesture that has a political dimension. However, the conditions of action for the anti-war movement are now much less favourable than last May.

Meanwhile the Japanese right has seized its opportunity. The ruling militarist right wants to end once and for all the pacifist clause of the Constitution, but in their majority, the people oppose this revision. North Korean missiles now periodically fly over the archipelago (without causing panic).

Prime Minister Abe Shinto decided to dissolve the House of Representatives and call for new parliamentary

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elections. He did not need to do so, already enjoying a two-thirds majority in both Houses. His calculation: to take advantage of the current situation to renew his majority in 2018 and thus ensure his continued rule until 2021 (and also draw attention from the scandals of favouritism affecting his wife).

Abe took little risk in deciding on an early election. The opposition is divided. The only danger was from a new political party, the Party of Hope (launched by Ms. Yuriko Koike, governor of Tokyo, which refers to the example of Emmanuel Macron!). By acting quickly, Abe Shinto is making sure there is no time for it to take root.

The relationship between Japan and the United States is complex, with Tokyo being Washington's main ally in the region (home to its largest military bases) and a potentially competing power. For now, however, Abe Shinto is supporting Donald Trump, saying any attempt at dialogue with Pyongyang would be useless.

In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte, elected in May 2016, has violently denounced the US hold on the archipelago, insulting Barak Obama. He has moved closer to China (eyeing his ability to invest), and opened up to Russia. The crisis in the southern island of Mindanao has given Washington the opportunity to quietly remind it that you cannot change alliances like shirts.

In May, fierce fighting erupted in the Muslim city of Marawi between government forces and jihadist Islamist movements, provoking a major humanitarian crisis and giving Duterte the opportunity to impose martial law throughout the island of Mindanao. [\[1\]](#) A creeping state of war still persists.

The United States has provided, according to defence agreements which are still valid, multifaceted aid to the Philippine army – whose officers are sent to US military academies: weapons, piloting of observation drones, tactical information, armed “advisors” on the ground, and so on. All things that neither China nor Russia can do today.

The Duterte regime has dictatorial traits (perhaps 13,000 deaths in one year in the name of the “war on drugs”). Its future remains uncertain. In any case, the United States has just reaffirmed its presence in its former colony, while the Philippine archipelago occupies a strategic position in the South China Sea – an area over which Beijing wants to consolidate its hegemony. Other countries in the region will not fail to note it.

For now, Beijing is unable to take the initiative on the Korean issue. China is suffering from the situation. At the United Nations Security Council, it has been forced to vote, like Russia, to strengthen sanctions against Pyongyang. Thus, all North Korean economic entities on Chinese soil, or in which North Korean companies participate, will be dissolved. It must be clear: its influence on the Pyongyang regime is very small, if not zero. If the latter collapses, China may one day see the US Army camp on its border; a nightmare.

Chinese personalities are sounding alarm bells through the international media. Their argument is simple: South Korea is much more important to China than the North. Pyongyang will lose its showdown with Washington. Beijing must urgently negotiate with the United States an intervention plan in case the Northern regime enters an open crisis; otherwise it will be out of the game and the response to the crisis will be for the sole benefit of the USA.

The problem is that this kind of negotiation (secret or public) requires a minimum climate of confidence, which does not exist, and which probably cannot exist between a rising power (China) that requires its place in the sun and an established power (the United States) which will not let go of its pre-eminence. In addition, Washington can rely on a solid network of inter-state alliances, while Beijing can only oppose it with fragile punctual agreements with Russia or with countries without strategic weight.

China retains a strong capacity for international initiative in other areas and in other places. On the Korean file, however, it faces two bad choices: bet on the resilience of the Pyongyang regime whatever the latter's policies, or hope for US concessions while it is in a position of weakness. Beijing does not seem to have found, so far, how to open a third way.

The deadly rationality of Kim Jong-un

The historical responsibility of US imperialism in the Korean crisis is evident. The war of 1950-1953 had nothing to do with the defence of democracy (the pro-US regime in the South was a dictatorship) or the right of peoples to self-determination; it was a question of countering the Maoist regime and avoiding the victory of an authentic Korean revolution. Washington has always refused to sign a peace treaty with Pyongyang, even when the North Korean regime was inward-looking (the "hermit kingdom"). The state of war has therefore been maintained with very real implications mentioned above.

In the past (under Clinton in particular), limited diplomatic agreements (such as the energy aid freeze on the nuclear program) have proved their effectiveness – but Washington has more or less quickly stopped respecting them. Many authorized voices this year urged Donald Trump to open negotiations with Pyongyang without being heard. The Korean crisis allows the United States to resume the initiative in East Asia, the US military to demand an increase in its budget and Trump to forget his troubles in domestic matters. Why deprive yourself?

The North Korean regime is indeed under threat, and this threat is now active. Given the fate of Saddam Hussein in Iraq or Gaddafi in Libya, it is logical that Kim Jong-un has concluded that the US only respects nuclear-weapon states. As many experts have pointed out, Pyongyang's choices are rational; but what rationality are we talking about?

Kim Jong-un has reinterpreted the concept of nuclear deterrence from the weak to the strong. He could have been satisfied with a "deterrent" capacity targeting South Korea and Japan. He claims to threaten the United States directly. Despite the progress made in intercontinental missiles, the technicality of the bomb or the size of the warheads, he is still far from the mark. On the other hand, he contributes to the revival of a general arms race (which includes missile defence shields), which permanently restores US pre-eminence and has deleterious consequences throughout the world.

In choosing nuclear escalation, Kim Jong-un rejected another path: to appeal to popular aspirations in the region to peace against the warlike policy of the United States. However, this alternative choice was possible and was not simply right "in principle". As evidence, the overthrow of the revanchist right in South Korea and the election of Moon Jae-in – or the deep strength of Japanese pacifism; not to mention the fragility of Trump in the USA. From Pakistan and India to the Philippines, anti-nuclear and anti-war movements exist. They could have found, with the Korean crisis, a trans-Asian point of convergence. This is a precious opportunity, because mobilizing movements from South, South-East and East Asia together is not easy, each region having its own history.

At the UN, 122 states have this year adopted the treaty to abolish nuclear weapons. All these struggles are continuing today, but they are weakened by Pyongyang's policy.

The rationality of Kim Jong-un's policies is based on the nature of his autocratic, dynastic, ethno-nationalist regime. The very idea of appealing to international solidarity, of promoting the development of anti-imperialist popular movements, of building broad diplomatic alliances, of playing on internal divisions in the United States, is obviously "organically" foreign to it.

We must denounce US interventionism, demand the cessation of its war policy, seek to impose immediate de-escalation, fight for the dismantling of its bases and the withdrawal of its armed forces. It is not necessary to present Kim Jong-un as a hero of resistance to imperialism in order to do this!

The great Asian game

Central (or Mid) Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Far East ... Muslim, Indian and Chinese worlds ... Asia does not exist historically as an entity – except, especially since the twentieth century, geo-strategically, if only because of China whose borders extend from Korea to Kazakhstan. The USA / China competition is played out on all continents and in all fields, but it takes a particular density in Asia.

Since the implosion of the USSR, quite spectacular reversals of alliance have occurred. Yesterday, Washington and Beijing jointly supported Islamabad against New Delhi, backed by Moscow. Today, the United States favours India. China for its part is securing its hold in Pakistan with major investments related to the construction of a “corridor” giving it privileged access to the ocean.

In South Asia, in addition to the US / China power struggle, the China / India competition is decisive, from Sri Lanka to Nepal or Afghanistan. India, China and the USA are now in direct competition in Burma, recently open to foreign investment. [2] Southeast Asia is diplomatically paralyzed by divisions between the client states of China (Laos, Cambodia, Brunei) or Thailand, under Chinese influence; a Vietnam which is fiercely opposed to Beijing; Malaysia and Singapore, which occupy niche markets in the global market, but are under economic pressure from China; and the Indonesian giant which still lives in the ideological era of the cold war.

The geostrategic balances in Asia are more and more unstable. If China has so far lost the initiative in the east of the continent, it has launched a gigantic project of expansion to the south and west: the development of two new “silk roads” (in a reference to the very old trade routes that linked Asia to Europe), the sea route to Africa and the Middle East, the land route to Kazakhstan and Eastern Europe. This project is still in its initial stages and it is too early to know what will actually happen; but it symbolizes Xi Jinping's level of ambition in China.

For the abolition of nuclear weapons!

We are witnessing two contradictory movements. On the one hand, the nuclear arms race has begun again. The impact of the Korean crisis in China illustrates it. Until then, Beijing considered that the possession of a relatively limited number of missiles and warheads allowed it to be a member of the closed club of recognized nuclear-armed powers and to apply the (perverse) doctrine of deterrence from the weak to the strong.

The deployment of Thaad antimissile missile batteries in South Korea has changed the game. Their scope covers a large part of the Chinese territory, and not only the north of the peninsula, neutralizing to a large extent the existing arsenal. Beijing must therefore acquire a fleet of strategic submarines (like Russia) to be dispersed in the oceans. To do this, it must modernize its submarines and make them less “noisy”, change its command system, miniaturize its warheads and so on. All things that are not self-evident; but the decision in principle seems taken.

The North Korean case also shows that proliferation continues beyond the official holders (there is already in addition Israel, Pakistan, India ... tomorrow Japan?). If the weapon exists, it will be used one day, it is a certainty. States like the US or France are considering it. The main nuclear threat to the world obviously does not come from Pyongyang

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and its micro-arsenal, but from Washington, the superpower in this area. Listen to Trump.

The counter-trend is expressed by the adoption at the UN last July of the treaty for the abolition of nuclear weapons, open today for ratification and the signature of states - and boycotted by the powers. Who in France has heard of this treaty? The French nuclear consensus has killed the news. With the exception of some countries (Japan, India, Pakistan and some others), the radical left has not invested in the disarmament movement, preferring at best petitions of principle.

The Korean crisis could be an opportunity for an examination of conscience on our part, a prelude to a serious political investment on a vital issue.

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[1] [Mindano: state of war and martial law in the Philippine south](#)

[2] [The Rohingya, the Burmese regime and the geopolitical stakes](#)