

25 YEARS IN PERSPECTIVE

Interview with Dr. Jangho Kim

For the 25th anniversary issue of the Yonsei Journal of International Studies we reached out to a former student and current lecturer at Yonsei University's Graduate School of International Studies. After receiving his M.A. in Political Science from Yonsei's GSIS program in 1995, Dr. Jangho Kim pursued his Ph.D. at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Following his Ph.D. he returned to Yonsei University's GSIS as a lecturer focusing on Northeast Asian security issues. His main research interests are on international relations theory, international security and Northeast Asian security, and he has written numerous articles on Northeast Asian security affairs in such journals as the SSCI-listed The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis, Korea Observer and the The Korean Journal of International Relations. He has lectured at Yonsei and Korea Universities, among others in Seoul, and the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in the United Kingdom. He is currently a lecturer at Yonsei University's GSIS and a Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification.

YJIS: South Korea's transition to a democratic state happened almost 25 years ago. Has Korea consolidated its democracy? What have been the biggest shortcomings or breakthroughs?

Professor Jangho Kim: I believe South Korea has consolidated its democracy in a sense. During the early part of the Cold War, the Americans as well as the Japanese had concerns that Korea would turn communist. Today, while I do not see any alternative to democracy on the horizon for South Korea, the process itself has been so compacted that there are evident side effects. For instance demonstrations, which played a huge role in facilitating South Korean democracy, still occur virtually every day. While this seems to indicate that our democracy has not matured, I do think there is no turning back and that there are no other options but democratic forms of government, and in that sense it has been consolidated fairly securely.

YJIS: What's been the most significant power transition in Korea?

Professor Kim: South Korea's democratization happened within such a short period, it is difficult to pinpoint such a transition, but I would say there were two definitive turning points.

One was the move from military dictatorships to what is at least, in terms of procedure and institutionalization, a democratic form of governance in the transition from President Kim Yong-sam to President Kim Dae-jung in 1998. Second, with the election of President Roh Moo-hyun we see the civil movement actually carrying the candidate to the Blue House and the presidency.

These two points notwithstanding, it is difficult to assess the situation in these terms because the period of economic development has been essentially as brief as the period of democratization. South Korea underwent both processes within a span of thirty to thirty-five years, whereas the UK, the United States, and other European countries have required anywhere from 150-300 years.

Every president from Rhee Syng-man to today's Lee Myung-bak had completely different challenges to face, largely generated by the rapid shifts in government and, inevitably, the economy. The agenda of the day for Rhee Syng-man was basically reconstruction, both in terms of state building and infrastructure, after the devastation from both the colonial period and the Korean War.

With President Park Chung-hee, I believe the view was that state building had progressed, and he needed to concentrate on the economy. He did this very well for two decades. I think most consider him our most respected and popular president. The point is that he faced a different situation than President Rhee-Syngman.

Then we have another military coup with Chun Doo-hwan. President Chun Doo-hwan, and also Roh Tae-woo, encountered different circumstances, but they felt they could carry on with the economic development the way Park Chung-hee did. This was a complete miscalculation on their part because, even by the time Chun Doo-hwan came to power, democratic uprisings were widespread, as seen in the Gwangju Massacre. I think Chun Doo-hwan was fighting against time itself and against the impact of imminent democratization.

By the time we transition to Roh Tae-woo in 1987, the year Yonsei GSIS was founded, many concessions were made and this itself was a major turning point. Until then, the middle class was supporting the student demonstrations, or the so-called democratic movement. After those concessions, however, I believe the student, or civil or middle class, movement lost its momentum. This was highly significant, not only for us today, but for all of Korean politics as well.

Kim Yong-sam, despite being downgraded as a president due to the Asian Financial Crisis, still remains the first civilian president, although he achieved his presidency through a coalition with the ruling party. (Not, it should be said, with the military at the time, but with the party led by Roh Tae-woo.) With all of this in place, I feel we can safely call Kim Dae-Jung our first real democratic president.

Kim Dae-jung too faced very different circumstances. He inherited a country that was on the path of economic development but simultaneously dealing with the Asian Financial Crisis, which demanded that he concentrate on economic reconstruction above anything else.

After Kim Dae-jung addressed that enormous challenge, Roh Moo-hyun came along, and we see a variety of civil movements arising in South Korea. He faced a new phase in that developmental period of post-war South Korean politics. His approach, and that of his supporters, as being dominantly to the left is why we now have another conservative government in Lee Myung-bak.

I think this is the result of the eventual consolidation of democracy, along with the economic platform upon which the democracy rests. I think that from this point on we may be able to compare presidents and their achievements the way prime ministers and presidents are compared in other countries. For the past fifty or sixty years of South Korea, however, it is very difficult to properly assess and compare these presidents on their own merits, given the extraordinary circumstances each of them has faced.

YJIS: How would you compare the democratic transitions in Korea in '87 to other transitions?

Professor Kim: I'm very proud of our democracy. I'm not proud of all the side effects of it, but I think we are probably the only country in Asia, and maybe even outside the so-called "Western world," that during the height (and on the frontlines) of the Cold War really developed democracy on our own. Our democracy was achieved by our people. Even Japan's democracy was, to a certain degree, implanted by the American occupation. Taiwanese democracy and capitalism from the word go was sustained even before Taiwan became Taiwan as their Nationalist government, led by Chiang Kai-shek, was supported by the United States during the Chinese Civil War. With India, I think we can, to a certain degree, agree that their democracy was implanted by the British. For South Korea, since 1945 no one cared whether we were democratic or not, as long as we were capitalist and allied with the United States. If you look at how the thirty-eighth parallel became our border, I think it becomes self-evident of how

little the major powers, and other democracies, really cared at the time.

YJIS: *Looking at North Korea and South Korea, what would you say has been the lowest point for the relations in the last 25 years? And how could it have been handled better?*

Professor Kim: I think I can say the lowest points have been when North Korea became a de facto nuclear power, the bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island, the sinking of the Cheonan military vessel, and the opportunities we missed from 1989-1994 when former communist states were transitioning to democracy.

When the Berlin Wall came down and communism began disintegrating around the world, we had a window of opportunity to build our relationship with North Korea. But we still had a Cold War mentality—not just the policy makers but the entire population. We were distressed with North Korea and they towards us as well. I think that could have been handled a little bit better and could have paved the way for future unification by building some sort of mechanisms connecting the two Koreas, mechanisms that could have even potentially prevented the nuclearization of North Korea. There is no specific moment in that window that we can pinpoint, but I think that period, and our behavior in it, triggered the atmosphere we are in now in terms of relations with North Korea.

The moment North Korea went nuclear by testing the first bomb in 2006 was very, very surprising. I remember being on campus when I heard about it in the afternoon. All the professors, including myself, who specialized in security issues were very surprised. I think that moment set the tone for how the two countries would operate, and I think it will continue to have consequences for the future as well.

Another low point would be the sinking of Cheonan and bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010. I think this was done as part of a scheme for their domestic politics as well as to show the world that they have become a nuclear power—a nuclear power that is bold enough to attack its neighbor.

I do not think you can look at these events separately. All of these events are connected and have consolidated how South Korea views North Korea.

YJIS: *Is the American-centric hub-and-spoke system in East Asia still intact? If so, is it effective as a proto-regional order, or do you recommend looking for a more multilateral approach?*

Professor Kim: In terms of order building, or security architecture, I think a more multipolar and more institutionalized system would be more effective. But given the fluid situation in the region with the rise of China, Japan's perception of this rise, and bilateral alliances in the region; the chances of creating genuine multilateral security mechanisms capable of handling this fundamental shift is really difficult.

For the time being, I believe, the hub-and-spoke system works. Simply, there has not been a hot war since the Korean War in northeast Asia. Despite all the differences, despite all the problems, and despite everything on the news, I think it is certainly working as a deterrent to what South Korea, Japan and the US have looked upon as threats.

It is not an ideal order but it is something that has worked for a very long time. It is something that has been tested and it is something that is coming into play even more as China's behavior grows more assertive. The Japanese and the Americans are strengthening their alliance in a way clearly perceptible. If China continues on its path, South Korea will have no option but follow the same path. While again, not ideal, this hub-and-spoke system has been effective, and I see no reason to replace it until we have a better alternative.

YJIS: *How do you interpret China's territorial disputes and how do you think they will progress?*

Professor Kim: China's territorial assertiveness, particularly with the Senkaku Islands, is almost an inevitable dispute. I think all the disputes that are arising now have everything to do with the rise of China and the changing power configuration created by America's unipolarity since the end of the Cold War and the reversion back into a bipolar structure with China's rise.

China's assertiveness paves the way for potential conflict. In these transitions, you are lucky if you do not see major conflict. These are major changes in power configurations, and I fear we will continue to see more of what we saw between China and Japan in Senkaku Islands.

YJIS: *Do you think these conflicts will strengthen America's alliances in the region?*

Professor Kim: Yes, certainly between Japan and the US, although I hope South Korea's alliance with the US is maintained and strengthened as well. However, there are a number of skeptical questions coming from the United States and Japan towards South Korea. During the previous Roh Moo-hyun administration, the government in South Korea leaned towards China as opposed to the United States. This created a very precarious situation. I think the best way for South Korea to preserve its interests is to definitively declare that its security and strategic commitments are with the United States. Despite occasional public expressions of anti-Americanism or pro-China feelings, I believe our alliance with the US is something that must be maintained. The main pillar of US foreign policy in the Pacific is its alliance with Japan, but this will hopefully come to encompass Korea, and Australia as well.

YJIS: *In the last 25 years, what has been the biggest change in America's role in East Asia and how do you think that will develop going forward?*

Professor Kim: Much discussion has been made about how the United States is "back" in Asia. I do not think that is the case; it never left Asia. US commitments, US alliance pledges and the US role in terms of keeping traditional rivals apart, have all been consistent. The conflict regarding the Senkaku Islands is testing it again, and it seems like the US committing of two aircraft carriers—one to the South-Chinese Sea and one to the East-Chinese Sea—has subdued the conflict there for the time being, as has the visit by Defense Secretary Panetta.

I think the US is still very much playing its traditional role. Some feel that this role, or presence, will diminish with the rise of China, but I think that involvement will continue at these levels as long as the US maintains its alliance system. I am not sure if there has been any truly significant change on the part of the Americans, in terms of their role in East Asia or the Pacific, in the last 25 years.

I believe the biggest factor is that as the US came out of the Cold War in 1989-1990, the push began to secure the alliance system and maintain a balance of power in the region to prevent conflict from arising. This translated into maintaining the traditional historical rivalries that existed underneath the blanket of the Cold War. The historical animosities date back before World War II, they were extended during the war and then were masked over by the Cold War. The Cold War is now over and the US became somewhat more flexible, in order to deal with changes the end of that "war" brought. Consequently, in terms

of “was there a change,” there was, but not of major substance. In terms of the basic role the US has played in Asia, there has been no truly significant change.

YJIS: *What is your perception of the upcoming leadership changes in Japan, China and Korea for intra-regional relations?*

Professor Kim: I believe China is settled with Xi Jinping. With Japan, most likely the power will revert to the old ruling party. As far as South Korea is concerned, and as far as I know, no one has a clue. I think, then, we will merely see more of the status quo. I do not see any real changes in terms of power configurations. Continuity, more than change, will be the hallmark of the next half decade.

China will become more assertive, but that is removed from power change. I am not saying Xi Jinping is more aggressive than Hu Jintao; their decisions and their foreign policy-making come from consensus more than from anything else. The old power led by Hu Jintao will continue to have some effect on the new power of Xi Jinping, so we see some continuation there.

Now, the biggest question for peace in East Asia is with Japan. China is becoming more assertive but that is almost a given; how Japan reacts to that is not a given. If Japan does become, as the Chinese fear, more right-wing, problems will arise for both Japan and the US. Japan is a fairly mature and modern democracy, and I think the society is well-grounded. I do not think the people of Japan will allow a drastic departure from what they have done in the past—as in the maintenance of their alliance with the US, of their peace constitution, and of their commitment to non-nuclear empowerment. The population is essentially conservative and even if Japan’s politicians moved for change, the nation’s own economic concerns would thwart this. Echoing Bill Clinton’s campaign rhetoric when he ran for president in 1992, it is very much about the economy for the Japanese, and this is the reality the new leaders must primarily address.

For South Korea, it is difficult to say who will win, but it seems likely that no hard-line policy will be continued, at least towards North Korea. How North Korea responds depends on how well Kim Jong-un consolidates his own power. Simply, when he is busy fighting off political adversaries domestically, he has no time for summit meetings with South Korea. Therefore, it is not only about what South Korea does, but about how North Korea reciprocates.

In terms of inter-Korean relations the ball is, and will always be, in their court whether or not we choose a hard-line or sunshine-type policy. The current administration has become hard-line only because North Korean actions dictated no other choice. The shelling of Yeongpyeong Island, the sinking of

the Cheonan, the nuclear period and the shooting of the South Korean tourist at Geumgang Mountain in North Korea, have all served to create South Korean hard-line policy, and not in a way desired by us. It is ultimately up to them.

I think whoever resides at the Blue House will still honor the commitment of the United States and try to strengthen that relationship. In terms of our vital interests the status quo will be maintained, but there will also be changes in degree depending on which candidate wins. But again, how we evolve in our relations with North Korea depends far more on North Korea than on South Korean policy, simply due to the aggression manifested by it. This situation also applies to how we react to the rise of China, and America's so-called "pacific pivot to Asia."

I think we realized with the recent Dokdo issue that our relationship with Japan has to be maintained. This is the only way we can have a truly healthy alliance with United States, while also confronting the threat that North Korea poses. We should maintain cooperation with both Japan and the United States. I would say if forced to choose between vast changes or the status quo, I would opt for the latter.

No country is actually able to initiate brand new policy or completely shift from its current position due to the fluid circumstances and power configurations in Northeast Asia. As there is no way to predict to a certain degree what is going to happen with the power balance in Northeast Asia, the wisest course is the course known.

It seems evident to me that everyone's bilateral relationships are linked to other relationships; US-China standing is influenced by the US alliance with Japan, as Japan-China relations are affected in the same way. Then, our own relationship with China is severely compounded by China's relationship to North Korea.

North Korea's threat is manifested through nuclear proliferation, and disregard of human rights. This must confound our attitude and policy towards North Korea, because we share norms with the United States and Japan opposed to its policies. China, conversely, is more in accord with North Korea, so the entire scenario becomes highly complicated. It is unwise to seek broad change when power configurations are so unpredictable, and certainly as they are in regard to China and Japan. There is some measure of predictability now, if only in that the international relationships discussed are largely so mutually dependent, which was not the case during the Cold War years. However, until the situation in North Korea stabilizes in a way acceptable to us and to our allies, I can only urge a retaining of the status quo. **YJIS**