

# NORTH KOREA - PERCEPTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

by  
Mr. Allan Maxwell<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Firstly, let me recall that I am a recently retired European Commission official and the views I express in this paper are personal and do not pretend to be EU policy on the matter.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to address you here, thanks to our organisers, on the somewhat fascinating subject of North Korea.

Many people have dealt with the DPRK, have spoken to this subject and there is a wealth of articles etc on North Korea. There are many excellent books on North Korea. (e.g. I expect you have, read and recommended the recent book, by MEP Glyn Ford). There are experts here today.

I wondered, therefore, what more I could contribute.

That being so, I thought that a more informal, unconventional approach to talking about North Korea might, possibly, be less boring and more productive. I would particularly like, therefore, to review perceptions and perspectives of North Korea and ascertain whether such an exercise could input into understanding how the North Korea standoff situation might be able to develop positively in the future.

## ICEBERG

Let us perhaps start with a sort of parlour game on perceptions sometimes used by psychologists and hosts on TV chat shows- which I tried on myself - which runs more or less as follows: you say “North Korea” and I give in a few words the instinctive reaction and the image it conjures up for me.

I tried this and after some reflection I managed to reduce my reaction to single (polite) politically correct word and so here it is:

North Korea equates to an Iceberg.

So why ‘iceberg’?

- An iceberg is, generally, something of a rarity which most people have never encountered –likewise North Korea appears in very few holiday catalogues and is mainly ‘an unknown’ (à la Donald.Rumsfeld) which by definition is more difficult to deal with;

---

<sup>1</sup> Allan Maxwell was previously an official of the European Commission and has been involved for over 10 years in matters concerning North Korea .He was EU Senior Advisor to the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation in New York, E.C Desk Officer for Korea and has visited North Korea a number of times.

- An iceberg evokes a mysterious and rather chilly presence which seems to fit a certain public profile of North Korea and does not facilitate contacts but causes isolation;
- Chilly, can also embrace a potentially menacing aspect. Icebergs can be menacing -as the Titanic found out to its cost (by the way Kim Il- Sung's birthday is said to be 15 April 1912- date of the sinking of the Titanic-);
- In addition, a significant well-known characteristic of an iceberg is the fact that it is only about 25% visible with some 75% of its mass "out of sight" -below the water-. This type of configuration seems to apply, at least in part, to North Korea and complicates an understanding of the country;
- Further, even the visible part of an iceberg is transparent only to a limited extent and this is, unfortunately, also the case for North Korea and this limits our information gathering;
- Last, but not least, an iceberg is, apparently, susceptible to climate change. It could possibly melt and cause damage. If properly handled, changes in the "climate" on the Korean Peninsula could, on the contrary, contribute to bringing about much sought after, beneficial affects for all concerned in the region.

Will this, therefore, be the case for the "North Korean" iceberg and how could the Six Party Talks and its Working Groups ('6PT'-the negotiation forum among the US, DPRK, China, Japan, South Korea and Russia) bring this about? What contribution could each of the concerned parties make and in what areas?

## THE STATE OF PLAY

To attempt to reply to this question we need to review, relations between the powers involved, the 'international community' political climate and also the political, economic and social situation in North Korea.

### The Actors

I would commence by making a brief, overall review of the main actors before examining each part in more detail.

The protagonists in the North Korean standoff are basically the US and North Korea; the US has dubbed, in 2002, North Korea 'the axis of evil' and North Korea has also called the US Secretary of Defense a nasty name. Relations in the Six Party Talks (6PT) seem to be or are better, thanks in the main, to individual and collective efforts in that forum. Chris Hill, the US Representative to the 6PT, is from time to time, in the news, pushing for progress in a balanced way as set out in the 6PT Statement of September 2005.

The Chair of the 6PT, China, has traditionally had good relations with the DPRK (the famous 'lips and teeth' remark) as allies in the Korean War. The DPRK nuclear test strained (possibly considerably) the relationship. China's moderating type role in the 6PT negotiations is much appreciated by the international community.

Relations with Japan are a sensitive and significant issue. The DPRK (as other countries) suffered the past effects of Japanese colonial rule; Japan has the problem of the fate of its nationals 'recently' abducted by North Korea. This painful situation needs the priority attention it is receiving.

South and North Korea have a special relationship as types of 'blood brothers' but sentiments and politics are, sometimes, difficult to reconcile and the past assistance given by the South to the North still needs to be properly recognised by the North.

After the demise of the Soviet Union (once the benefactor of the DPRK), Russia has much reduced relations with North Korea but is still generally able to make a positive contribution to the 6PT.

The EU (which although not in the 6PT 'neighbours' negotiations) has managed to maintain a balanced relationship with the DPRK with both large amounts of food projects assistance to the North's population and also strong support for sanctions against North Korea. The EU could, however, do more.

Finally, there is the international community represented by the UN which takes a particular leading role in sanctions and is active in food security related issues. There is the major role played by the IAEA in nuclear non-proliferation matters.

Last but not least there is the question of the permanent peace regime to be installed on the Korean Peninsula.

In spite of this long list of significant actors, the US can, nonetheless, be seen as the main political pacemaker in keeping the 6PT process moving forward, in the right way. North Korea clearly, for example, sets great store by the U.S action concerning being removed from the U.S.list of sponsors of terrorism and by the non-application of the Trading with the Enemy Act to the DPRK. 'Black' listing does limit trade to 'black' markets which is bad for the transition required in the DPRK economy.

There is, of course, some speculation about the possibility of a change in the US Administration and how this might affect relations with North Korea. It is not for me to enter into these matters. Given the 6PT programme, I do not, personally, see new major changes yet on the near horizon although future atmospherics might be more amenable to increasing the pace of progress. The 6PT has recently become more active (handing over of the nuclear programmes list and destruction of the cooling tower at Yongbyon by the DPRK) and this is promising. The basic agenda set out in the 6PT September 2005 Agreement (as updated since) is the best one in the circumstances. The standoff, in reality, cannot end without the U.S.' "O.K."

China, as host to the 6PT, has devoted much diplomatic time and attention to keeping the process on track (albeit laboriously) and has gained the appreciation of the international community for this difficult and thankless role it is playing. This, hopefully, looks set to continue and is a condition vital to the success of the 6PT.

At the same time, China is giving aid and making investments in the commercial and industrial sectors in North Korea to contribute to a better future and to maintain good reciprocal relations. This should comprise a positive input to the 'climate change'. Certain

conditions concerning North Korea refugees in China need improvement to avoid such evils as trafficking.

Japan has a most difficult relationship with North Korea and a DPRK missile has flown over Japan. The issue of the fate of the Japanese abductees is a dominant subject for its public opinion. It is also a subject of concern and support from the international community. Japanese public opinion does, one hopes, recognise the significant and constant efforts made by its government and officials in trying to find an acceptable outcome to this issue. How much more can be achieved remains to be seen? Further information may not necessarily all be comforting. The Japanese government will, then, be required to take a difficult decision bearing in mind all their priorities in this regional standoff.

The Republic of Korea is, perhaps, the party most involved in the continuous implementation of more detailed relations with North Korea as well as in the 6PT political negotiations. This is both an opportunity and a challenge. The ROK has, for many years, provided food and industrial assistance and this should be able to continue in the future when the conditions are right. The second inter-Korean Summit of 2-4 October 2007 underlined the potential extent of improving economic, social and political relations which would change the climate on the Korean Peninsula. This process will, surely, keep in step and be mutually supportive of the 6PT. This is a key short and long term mission in the stabilisation of the Korean Peninsula and a significant responsibility for South Korea.

Russia has used its good offices in the 6PT process and, in particular, a Russian bank was instrumental in resolving the thorny issue of the final transfer of funds in the Banco Delta Asia mini crisis. In the future Russia will no doubt also be interested in the industrial aspects of the 6PT solution programme and could show itself to be a reliable supplier of energy to North Korea.

Last but not least in this listing there is the role of the EU which is a major economic actor in North East Asia, a foremost proponent of the NPT regime and consistently engaging (with NGO experts) with the DPRK in food security and related projects. The EU, as other states, has also a strong interest in and commitment to improving the human rights situation in North Korea and supports and sponsors the UN sanctions. In the future the EU could become involved with one or another Working Group set up under the February 13 2007 6PT Agreement as mentioned below (Denuclearisation, Economic/Energy Cooperation and the NE Asia Peace and Security Mechanism Groups are possibilities).

When all is said and done North Korea remains, at least publicly, however, the main protagonist. It is well aware of that position and makes the most of it. North Korea particularly insists on its sovereign rights and not being subject to hostility; it claims that a Peace Treaty could resolve those major issues.

North Korea is involved with its 6PT neighbours in implementing the September 2005 Agreement (with the later additions) and must demonstrate that it will implement the texts on an 'action for action' basis. This is of particular importance in the key area of non-proliferation. In addition to the economic progress foreseen in the texts, North Korea needs also to give considerable and rapid attention to domestic social aspects such as the basic freedoms and other expressions of related human rights such as health care and food security

(e.g. vaccination and women and children's nutrition). There must be better cooperation with states and the international community and moves to end self imposed isolation.

The sum total of these relations, plus those of some 155 or so other states, constitutes the "international community" and its perception of North Korea.

The October 2006 UN sanctions on North Korea demonstrated that the international community found unacceptable the instability caused by North Korea's menacing proliferating actions including, in particular, its nuclear explosive test.

Notwithstanding the international community remains supportive of the need to provide aid to the suffering North Korea population if properly monitored. North Korea watchers know, however, that the road to good intentions in North Korea can be paved with hell. Good luck and support to all those efforts (e.g. the WFP and US AID) and to human rights initiatives. The Secretary-General of the UN Ban Ki-moon will, no doubt, continue to direct efficiently the policies required. There is also the need for a peace treaty to end officially the Korean War. This could also be a sort of further confirmation that the standoff had formally ended.

What then are the significant issues that face the main actors?

Non-proliferation remains the central issue in the 6PT and the September 2005 6PT agreement refers to the return, at an early date, of the DPRK to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state. In spite of the nuclear test I continue, personally, to believe that this is still possible. The EU as a major proponent of the NPT should continue to support all efforts in the 6PT and elsewhere to achieve this objective. The correct and complete declaration by North Korea of all its nuclear programmes is a critical document and it will be examined and verified carefully. It is the key to a series of future actions and steps to keep the process moving in a controlled manner. The 6PT has set up a Working Group on Denuclearisation and the EU with its experience and expertise could contribute meaningfully to the Group's work and I hope this will be possible. It seems certain that North Korea will raise firmly its claims for having a civil nuclear reactor for a number of reasons both political and economic some of which are currently controversial. The main actors will be called upon to grasp this nettle bearing in mind that nuclear transactions will be under IAEA presence and control. The IAEA has always done a good job in North Korea and its return after expulsion is significant technically, politically and symbolically and must be fully supported. The non proliferation situations concerning Syria and also Iran will also have a certain influence on attitudes.

When nuclear is mentioned the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation "KEDO" probably comes to mind and there is speculation that, if so agreed, KEDO might be able to be rehabilitated in some form. I do not know the answer to that but I could imagine that the KEDO site at Kumho (which I once called "Kedoville") could be used for energy projects as a considerable infrastructure exists there financed by KEDO Executive Board members. It is a modern, well serviced small town by North Korean standards. The overall energy dossier is the most important part of the economic aid foreseen in the 6PT agreement and the total finance involved will be many billions of US \$ and the initiatives necessary will involve all the main actors.

The DPRK needs to respond to and participate in these initiatives and, in so doing, to modernise the country and obtain benefits for its people through improved living conditions.

The economy should transit further away from a centrally controlled model towards free commerce. Contacts such as the EU business seminars in Pyongyang and seminars outside North Korea are useful in that context. The dilapidated, “melted down” industrial infrastructures, particularly in the energy sector, must be rehabilitated or replaced. This will be a major initiative calling for international, expert assistance and considerable finance. Efficient planning, programming and coordination will be required with the main international actors and among the DPRK State Party organs. The military is a powerful and effective force in North Korea.

Kim Jong-il is firmly in charge of North Korea but as outsiders we have little visible information on who could be his eventual successor and how this could affect stability. This could be a disadvantage.

The human rights situation should be improved as soon as possible with external assistance. We should have more information to render more ‘transparent’ social conditions in North Korea and be prepared to discuss with North Koreans how we, in other countries, tackle these problems. North Korea should devote more resources, with international support, to food security programmes and health care including sanitation. These can be prickly issues with North Korea but they should appreciate how external, specialised contributions can be of assistance and also the universal nature of human rights including freedoms.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this presentation could be that the ‘climate’ needs to be changed in North Korea and that engagement, cooperation and momentum are key factors. The Korean Peninsula has passed through a number of significant phases. There has been the “conflict” of the Korean War, followed by uneasy “co-existence” which degenerated thereafter into ‘confrontation’ (the standoff). Now is the time for real “cooperation” based on understanding, responsible behaviour, respect and effort. These are essential aspects to resolve the issues still facing the DPRK, the other states in the 6PT and the international community. Moving forward the solutions found will require careful appraisal and verification at each critical step. We are looking at a lengthy, demanding process calling for responsible engagement and momentum but the successes which could be achieved can be qualified not only as major but also, potentially, as historic.

