



Korea and Korea: first round

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Relations internationales

Finally, the real question is that after a century of battles, terrifying confrontations, irreparable clashes, can the communist collectivist version of power and society be compatible with that of the liberal-capitalist society?

Professor Françoise THIBAUT details the global stakes of the meetings over the next few months, the smiles and handshakes, the hugs and round tables.

There... It's done: the first step has been taken.

Silent diplomacy (real diplomacy) has done its work. The weary desire for permanent transparency imposed by the media has been skilfully circumvented. Dozens of gentlemen in dark suits and ties, with diplomatic passports, have taken dozens of planes to meet in quiet and discreet places to discuss serious matters. It took time, a lot of patience, and the need for a common vocabulary.

The two Koreas are rebuilding the beginning of a shared universe. It will take time, a lot of patience, and it is not certain that it will succeed. But the most important thing is the acquisition of this common platform of interests, without the intervention of outside powers, even if they are very "powerful" or influence in the background. This good prospect emerged from the disastrous conference in Vancouver in January, where none of the Koreas had been invited: its conclusion was that only the two nations concerned could find a common solution satisfactory to everyone. Then there was the beneficial interlude of the Winter Olympics where, under the guise of sporting fun, the first operational meetings could take place. The respective representatives of Mr Kim and Mr Moon were able to gauge their ability to reach an agreement.

In his nuclear delirium, which was entirely voluntary, Kim Jong-Un achieved his first objective: to make himself and his state known and respected by letting the world know that he was not a "paper tiger", but a leader leading an armed and disciplined nation.

"Frightening" is just one way of asserting oneself in politics. The second objective was to achieve recognition that was no longer symbolic, but real and legal: the establishment of the armistice of 1953 and the border of the 38th parallel, when hostilities between Westerners and communists came to an end, left the question of peace between the two spaces delimited by international authority "gaping". It is therefore time to remedy the painful vacuum. This is the issue at stake today. North Korea is now the purest symbol of the communist state (now that Cuba has rushed into the monetarist breach and Russia and China are pursuing alternative policies). As such, it represents an authoritarian vision of power for the good of the people, but also a dynastic one (which is paradoxical). After three years of war and two million deaths, the peninsula had to live again, whatever form of government it took. The communist option in the north, the liberal and capitalist option in the south, together represent the most pathetic dilemma of our troubled and turbulent times.

Now, the ambition of the game will be to establish a win-win' situation: the anxiety of the Pacific area, as a whole and in all its diversity, has been and remains very great; there is no question of moving further towards destabilisation. All of Korea's close neighbours have reached alarm levels that are not sustainable in the long term. From Australia to Japan, from Singapore to the Philippines, the nuclear tests and the extremely threatening policy of Kim Jong-Un have created panic.

This is where the clan of communist "big brothers" intervened: first China and Russia (still Soviet) intervened to moderate the aggressive fervour; the economic and financial stakes are high. Especially for President Xi's China, whose plans for economic conquest in the Pacific and the rest of the world must not be thwarted by an irresponsible ally. Russia, which is a great provider of means and procedures for social management, has also wanted to strengthen its role as a moderator. Thus, on the North Korean side, the context is concrete.

On the other hand, Donald Trump is not wrong when he says that it is his "blows" that have triggered the path towards appeasement. If we remember correctly, in 1994, Bill Clinton, then President of the United States, finally, after interminable discussions, wrung an agreement from the ultra-hypnotic father of the current Kim: he promised to abandon his military nuclear program in exchange for civilian economic aid. Under the cover of this agreement, South Korea, Japan and other states provided two small civilian nuclear reactors and billions of dollars in aid. Clinton naively said, "This is a good deal that will provide better security for everyone and allow North Korea to develop. Mr. Kim did not dismantle anything and pocketed the dollars². 2 Then George W. Bush tried to be tougher, and unsuccessfully started new negotiations; the answer, in 2006, was the first nuclear test. All the Obama administration's work was to slow down the devastating effects of this policy as much as possible, while China and Russia supported their North Korean ally.

Now that he has gained international notoriety and consolidated his reputation, Mr. Kim wants to move towards economic solidification and, no doubt, try to make his social system less appalling. In order to do so, he must "open up to the world", find new financial ties, use westernized social models; he knows them well, since a large part of his youth was spent in Europe and the United States. He knows their qualities and faults.

We must not think about reunification. The assumption is absurd. On what basis could it exist? Neither of the protagonists wants it, nor do either of the two peoples. The two systems, as they exist, are at the antipodes of each other. At most, targeted cooperation in specific areas would be appreciated by both sides.

Perhaps the meeting with Donald Trump in June 2018 will not take place? Perhaps it will be disastrous? Trump will not budge from total denuclearization, and Mr. Kim will demand the disappearance of the North American armed bases closest to his borders. Nevertheless, diplomatic professionals are banking on bilateral pacification. A moderator has been introduced into this lively dialogue: the South Korean representative, who alone can understand the views of both sides. The ideal logical outcome would be, almost 70 years after the separatist armistice, the signing of a genuine peace treaty and the abandonment of the opaque and painful militarized border.

But there is still a long way to go. How much of it is sincerity or hypocrisy? Is it strictly opportunistic calculation and a genuine desire for peace? Should we bet on a remarkable coup de théâtre (or accelerator) committed by two unpredictable interlocutors or on a devastating stalemate?

Finally, the real question is: at the end of a century of battles, terrifying clashes, irreparable clashes, can the communist collectivist version of power and society be compatible with that of the liberal-capitalist society?

The stakes of the meetings over the next two months, of these smiles and handshakes, of these hugs and round tables, are global. And in some ways it is philosophical. It concerns us all, it presents a resurgence of the nuclear perils that were thought to have disappeared forever, and it will also have an impact on the future of Europe, because from now on everything is linked.

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1-Discreet political and diplomatic meetings are a ritual of the Olympic Games. It began a long time ago, well before the Second World War, but it was above all from 1948 onwards that this aspect developed: in order to prove to the world that they still existed and that peace was truly acquired, the Europeans and the International Committee very quickly re-established the Olympic tradition. The British took up the torch again in 1948, since the 1944 Games had been impossible there. In search of a neutral European capital, untouched by the war and its bombings (nor in a country with a fascist government), Helsinki in 1952, the capital of Finland, was the choice. It was here that North Americans and Soviets met for the first time in the context of the Cold War. The highly symbolic event was also the three victories of Emile Zatopek, a brilliant representative of the Eastern World, while the USA won the most medals.

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