

Pacific Century Institute
Salon de Palace Garden
Third Session
November 18, 2015

Background: The PCI 25th Anniversary dinner in Seoul on May 19, 2015 introduced the idea, articulated by keynote speaker Volker Rühle, that South Korea needs to develop a bipartisan, fundamental, strategic policy toward North Korea. To follow up on that initiative, PCI co-founder Spencer Kim offered his Seoul residence in the Palace Garden building as a venue for a series of “salons” in the European style of the 17th to 19th centuries in order to bring conservative and progressive opinion-shapers together to discuss the various facets that would be entailed in developing such a bipartisan policy. Selected guests socialize over a convivial dinner and then discuss a specified topic, coordinated by a convener.

The salon discussions are carried out under the Chatham House Rule, which states. *“When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed”.*

Topic for Session: The Ideological divide in South Korea: Current Issues.

Coordinator: The convener was an American who has a long association with Korea of some forty years.

Participants: Thirteen Koreans and Americans. Some have academic backgrounds, others come from business and diplomacy. Several have formerly held high positions in government. All are well versed in Korean domestic and foreign affairs.

Language: The discussion was in English.

Discussion:

One participant wondered if the others had read the recent New York Times op-ed piece on the controversy over the Korean government’s plan to retake control of writing school history books (written by Se-Woong Koo, editor of Korea Exposé, an online magazine, it argues that “there is no question that Ms. Park and her Saenuri Party will whitewash the past to bolster the conservative cause at the expense of the education system and South Korea’s international reputation as a democracy” -- <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/13/opinion/south-koreas-textbook-whitewash.html>.)

Critics of the textbook writing plan also argue that anyone who says the ROK was founded in 1948 instead of 1919 is adulating “dictator” Syngman Rhee and making him the founder of the Republic. They further charge that speaking well of Syngman Rhee is going against Article 1 of the Constitution, which says the ROK is a democratic republic. All this is sophistry. According to most Korean textbooks now widely in use, Rhee was a dictator, pro-Japanese collaborator, Hawaiian gangster, thief, womanizer, etc. That’s the position which, unfortunately, the leader of the opposition party, Moon Jae-in, is taking. Moon has not been reading history. According to the opposition viewpoint, anything the ruling party sponsors has to be wrong. That’s why we now have this history war. He/she said that while being

opposed to the idea of the government coming out with a plan to author textbooks, it is understandable why President Park Geun-hye is doing it. What we have now is leftist-biased textbooks with the exception of just one version. Most school textbooks in use now are heavily influenced by North Korean textbooks. Opponents of President Park's plan even argue that textbooks should use the term "liberal democracy" instead of just "democracy." These opponents are ideologically inflexible in their own way.

Another participant said the textbook issue is not unique to Korea. In 1979 a book called, "America Revised" by Francis Fitzgerald came out. She reviewed American textbooks from the 1920s through 1970s and how they kept changing what they said about the nation's history depending on what current opinion-makers wanted. It's still an issue in the U.S. What is history teaching about? Is it about unifying the country, teaching citizenship and anti-Communism? It's a huge debate, very polarized. Even seven years after electing an African-American as president of the US, the state of Texas, with the largest school district in the nation, bought up millions of textbooks that described slaves from Africa as "workers." (McGraw-Hill World Geography textbook, in a section titled Patterns of Immigration, said, "The Atlantic Slave Trade between the 1500s and 1800s brought millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations.") There was a big objection to that. I'm not trying to diminish particular challenges in Korea. The point is, textbook issue raise all kinds of questions elsewhere as well.

The first participant replied that revisionism is everywhere, it's even healthy sometimes. But willful distortion of facts and denial of certain very important facts is something like Stalin's distortion of history in the Soviet Union He distorted historical facts to get rid of prominent revolutionaries who were his political enemies.

The second participant answered that he/she thinks South Korea is going to come out okay on this somehow. We now have the Internet. Textbooks are not the only thing that you have. They are no longer a Bible. Today's students can Google and find out that Syngman Rhee was not really a fascist. Technology can lead to diversity. And also, in terms of the battle for legitimacy with North Korea, South Korea has won.

On the point about North Korea, the first participant replied that he/she was more worried than that. The North Koreans are 100 times smarter than South Korea in terms of propaganda and agitation.

The second participant said it was his/her impression that the Park government had lost public understanding of its professed goal. The public perception is that the government is trying to impose one textbook and one view of history, not seeking a rebalance.

The first participant agreed that the government's approach is wrong. It's a very unfortunate situation. And now division of the country over the textbook issue is real.

Another participant said China is much worse. There's no room for historical debate there. It's an extremely narrow teaching of history. Chinese students from high school on can tell actual facts from the false ones. They know which facts to memorize to pass the college entrance exam. They are smart, and they have skeptical minds. That's why they became so cynical. Chinese history teachers teach their students what is needed to be taught in class and after that, they tell jokes about the real history too. He/she said, as a historian, he/she strongly and passionately disagrees with what the South Korean government is doing.

There is nothing Korea can learn from China, except not to regress further. The problem with the current textbooks is one thing, but to make the problem worse is a huge mistake. What the South Korean government is doing can corrupt the process of history.

The first participant who spoke replied that while the problem is serious politically, and he/she thinks the government approach is wrong, the new textbooks will probably not be radically different from the previous ones in what they cover. There is no intellectual debate, but a political one.

The participant who earlier referenced history books in China added that the textbook issue will undermine South Korea's position vis-a-vis its relations with Japan. He/she said he/she had met a Japanese friend who couldn't hide a smile on his face when discussing the history book controversy.

Another participant said that regarding the history book issue, he/she understands why the South Korean government is doing what it is doing, but he/she also doesn't agree with the way it is handling the issue. To deal with the polarization of South Korean society, he/she said, we must expand the middle ground by marginalizing the far left and the far right. His/her friends, who are either conservatives or progressives, are having regular dialogues to help better understand each other's position. He/she said that his/her idea for the solution of North Korean problem is what can be called "proportional engagement" where you should engage more with the North based on certain principles.

This participant added that he/she had even heard one college professor, who used to be a dissident leader, acknowledge North Korea's role in the sinking of the Cheonan warship.

A participant noted that the mention of the Cheonan raised another issue in the ideological divide. He/she recalled the position of former US Ambassador to the ROK, Donald Gregg, who pointed to a number of scientific questions that Gregg felt were not sufficiently answered in the official report on the Cheonan. Ambassador Gregg raised the issue because there were Americans involved in the investigation and he felt they needed to be more comprehensive. Gregg believed that the U.S. had fought wars based on faulty intelligence – the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the phantom WMDs in Iraq. Ambassador Gregg did not say that the North Koreans did not sink the Cheonan; he said the report had too many open questions and there should have been a better effort to answer them before taking strong action against North Korea.

A participant who held a high-ranking post at Chong Wa Dae at the time said he/she was furious over Gregg's stance when Gregg announced he was skeptical of the evidence of North Korea's hand in the Cheonan incident. He/she said he/she thought the ROK government made a mistake in not announcing even earlier that it was a North Korean torpedo attack that led to the sinking of Cheonan. The ROK government delayed announcing anything because it thought it needed objective proof. It was ready to do anything to ascertain the facts to see if it was the work of the North Koreans. A Korean-American scholar who raised questions about the investigation was invited to come to Korea and see for himself all the evidence about the incident, but he never came.

He/she said that even North Korea has tacitly acknowledged its role in the sinking of Cheonan. During a high-level meeting in Beijing between the South and the North in the spring of 2011, North Korean officials, who were all KPA generals, never said that they didn't do it when confronted by their South Korean counterparts.

A participant who had been a US government official with access to the US government's information

about the Cheonan incident at the time of the incident said the results of the investigation were the best it could do. In the end, there was irrefutable evidence which was presented in a very clear way. It was a shocking action by the North. That there are doubts among many people, including some who are friends, is still puzzling. But he/she said it is possible the South Korean government might have overplayed its hand ahead of a parliamentary by-election by overemphasizing the North Korean threat.

A participant said he/she felt that despite the high-profile of the Cheonan incident, it was not a turning point in the South-North Korean relationship especially for the younger people in South Korea.

Another participant said that Tony Namkung said this morning in an article in the Hangyorye Shinmun that North Korea is willing to talk to the South in an effort to improve its relations with the US (http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/718000.html.) If the report is true, that's a departure from North Korea's recent past stance toward South Korea and the US.

The participant who had been a US government official said it was difficult to expect any normalization soon unless North Korea shows some readiness to give up its nuclear program.

A participant who had been a ROK government official said it was highly unlikely the North would show such readiness.

A participant then asked what the point would be of U.S. normalization of relations with North Korea.

A participant who had been a ROK government official said the main value would be in not continuing to drive North Korea into Chinese hands. North Korea is terrified of China in the long run. In that sense if you can reduce North Korean reliance on China, normalization might lead North Korea to lessen the problems it causes for the ROK and US in order to balance out its fears of China.

Another participant, who also held a high position in the ROK government said he/she agreed that North Korea has an intrinsic fear about China. He/she said he/she had also read the Hangyorye article. Even if North Korea is willing to talk to the South, the question is whether Seoul is ready to talk to Pyongyang. The South hasn't got any consistent, reliable policy toward North Korea. Past governments have gone to the far right and then too far to the left too frequently. That's why North Korea is waiting for the next government to come in the South. Although not a great fan of summit meetings between South Korea and North Korea, the participant said he/she saw a need to have back channels with North Korea to sound out their positions.

Another of the participants, who also held a high ROK government position, said he/she did not believe in behind the scene channels because past experience has shown no results from such a mechanism. President Park Geun-hye won't have one either because she said publicly that she was opposed to behind the scene contacts with the North.

A participant then asked if it were possible to invite several hundred young North Korean students, the offspring of the elite, to study in the South. At the time of transformation in Russia, continuity in the elite structure helped avoid bloodshed when the system changed.

A participant noted that over the years a number of North Korean students have studied in the US and they worked very hard at their studies. Some US NGOs have sponsored study programs for over ten years, bringing some teachers and students to the US and many more for training in third countries. The

North Korean government was serious about the programs. There is still an offer on the table of advanced schooling in the US for children of the North Korean elite. Syracuse University has been on the forefront of educating Russian and Chinese students over the years in large numbers.

A participant called attention to the need for trust in initiatives with the North. He/she said CNN is a prime example of building trust with North Korea. It needed a lot of investment over time. North Koreans now love CNN. But it didn't happen overnight.

A participant said it was his/her feeling that there is a kind of embedded DNA of division in Koreans. Speaking of the history book controversy, it is important to point out that the Korean Provisional Government (KPG) led by Syngman Rhee was not recognized by any country until 1948 when the first government was officially inaugurated. Even the US did not approve of the existence of KPG earlier. There were two reasons, one being the division of public opinion in the Korean community even in the US as to which was the legitimate government of Korea. The other reason was that the KPG didn't have a presence on Korean soil until 1945.

Koreans are living in the past. They are prisoners of history. They have to move forward regardless of where one stands on the textbook issue. Regarding the North Korean issue, it will be a waste of time if Washington continues to pursue its current policy of "strategic patience" with North Korea because China will never give up its close ally on its border.

Another participant strongly disagreed with the DNA of division statement, saying he/she thought that Koreans, North and South, progressives and conservatives, displayed strong similarities and a sense of desire for unity. The purpose of events such as this salon is accepting, even celebrating, differences but within a recognition of the underlying commonality.

In reaction, a participant said it is a fact that South Korean society is deeply polarized ideologically, politically, and generationally. However, the South, despite differences in views on the North, should still seek to find a way to reconcile with it instead of continuing confrontation.

A participant drew a parallel to the strategy of North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. The remarks about a "division gene" is reminiscent of how the North Vietnamese government exploited the differences in the US polity. US media and academia claimed that Southeast Asia would be better off without Americans. Similarly, North Korea may now be using willingness to talk, or unwillingness to talk, to exploit divisions in South Korea.

A Korean participant said that the division in South Korean society is so serious it is similar to the IS (Islamic State) problem. This leads him/her to be very pessimistic.

As a final statement, another Korean participant said that although he/she didn't agree with the sense of deep disagreement over history that underlies the textbook controversy, he/she did agree with the need for engagement with North Korea.