

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN KOREAN RELATIONS: THE DILEMMA OF PEACE UNDER KIM JONG-UN'S REGIME

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ABSTRACT

Tensions in the Korean peninsula are a current theme in contemporary international relations, especially due to the possible nuclear dimension that a conflict in this region could have. For this reason, this article seeks to answer the question about what are the biggest challenges to establish peace in the Korean peninsula during the Kim Jong-Un regime. For this to be possible, the article describes the current dynamics between North and South Korea in order to identify the variables that prevent the establishment of a peace agreement between the two nations, investigating the influence and interests of China and the United States in the history of the peninsula, inducing bilateral cooperation or intensifying conflict. The article also discusses the identity gap between the Korean nations and its consequences in the struggle for the reunification of the peninsula.

Keywords: Korean Peninsula, South Korea, North Korea, Conflict, Kim Jong-Un.

INTRODUCTION

The Korean peninsula has been the stage of several conflicts throughout its history. Conflicts that, at times, involved the great powers of each period, such as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the United States (USA) and the People's Republic of China, in addition to imperial Japan, tsarist Russia and China under the Qing dynasty in earlier periods.

As pointed out by Basu (2019), the succession of hostilities influenced by the geopolitical interests of the actors involved left the Korean peninsula conquered, colonized and, finally, divided in the post-Cold War era. Which leads to the belief that the awakening of the 21st century has brought to light not only the intensification of globalization and new possibilities of connection between countries, but also revealed the existence of remnants of the conflicts of the last century, such as the war between the two Koreas.

Tensions in the Korean peninsula are a current theme in contemporary international relations, especially due to the possible nuclear dimension that a conflict in this region would have. Thus, this article seeks to answer the question about what the greatest challenges are to establish peace in the Korean peninsula

during the Kim Jong-Un regime. To help build this response, the following aspects will be analyzed: the historical precedents of the current dispute, the formation of the two Koreas as divergent nations and the external influences in the Korean conflict. Furthermore, the challenges of the relationship between the two Koreas in the contemporary world will be examined, based on the hypothesis that, today, the two Korean nations are more distinct than similar, especially regarding their socioeconomic and cultural development, and reflecting on the reasons that avoid the establishment of a peace agreement between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea (hereinafter, North Korea and South Korea, respectively).

Recognizing that it is impossible to carry out any type of political analysis without making some reference to the past, the discussion proposed in this article begins with a review of the recent history of the Korean peninsula, pointing out the major political and social milestones in the region, since the peninsula's division until the current moment. Then, the external influences in the conflict will be discussed, especially the influence of China and the United States as the biggest world powers.

Then, the possible solutions to the Korean dilemma will be debated, considering its history, external influences and the interests involved in the issue. Finally, the article will also go through different views on the reunification of the peninsula, arriving at the question of what kind of peace is possible for the Korean peninsula in the near future.

GENERAL CONTEXT OF THE CONFLICT: BACKGROUND AND CURRENT POSITION OF THE COUNTRIES

The tensions that exist today in the Korean Peninsula are the result of the Korean War, a conflict that took place between 1950 and 1953, motivated by the ideological differences that existed within the Korean Peninsula after the end of World War II. This confrontation was driven by the bipolarity of the International System during the Cold War, waged between the United States and the Soviet Union, and had the influence of their respective blocs during the process of recognition of the Korean governments on the International System.

For this reason, it is important to remember that since the armistice signing² in 1953, the two Koreas have failed to establish solid bilateral rela-

tions. One of the main reasons for this diplomatic distance between the two nations is the North Korean philosophy of independence and self-sufficiency, the *Juche* Ideology, marked by the careful selection of its few diplomatic relations and commercial partnerships (KIM, 2014). In addition, another reason that keeps these two nations apart is the growth of North Korea's threats to the International System through its continuous tests of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles (SOUZA; DARSIE, 2018). Including, in the recent history of rivalries, the explosion of the Kaesong office, located in the border region between the two nations, and a symbol of the Inter-Korean relations.

Sousa and Darsie (2018) believe that, although worrisome, North Korea's threats can also be interpreted as a game of power. This strategy aims to demonstrate military power and show that the country is not willing to abandon its nuclear program, even amid the harsh sanctions applied by the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU). For the authors, by causing instability in the peninsula, North Korea's hostile attitude interferes with regional security and draws the attention of neighboring countries, which places the country in a better negotiating position in future agreements regarding its nuclear

program (SOUZA; DARSIE, 2018).

This form of bargaining practiced by North Korea can be explained by the argument proposed by Joseph Nye (2002) when he states that power is the ability to achieve your goals and change the behavior of others to achieve them, if necessary. As explained by the author, this ability is often associated with the possession of certain resources (NYE JR., 2002). Resources which, in the case of North Korea under Kim Jong-Un's regime, come in the form of nuclear weapons and threats to other countries.

South Korea, on the other hand, has forged a positive image for itself, focused on seeking and maintaining harmonious relationships with its neighbors and on its integration into the Asian community. The country also maintains good relations with other nations around the globe, signing numerous bilateral and multilateral trade agreements that boost its Gross Domestic Product, making it one of the world's leading economies and increasing its regional and global relevance.

However, as pointed out by Souza (2017), the South still relies on its agreements with the United States to guarantee its territorial security and the protection of the South Korean people in the event of a direct conflict with North

Korea, mainly because the latter invests a good part of its annual revenue in improving its sources of defense, such as the army and nuclear weapons (KIM, 2014).

Furthermore, the internal transformations that each of these societies underwent led to economic and cultural distancing between the two nations, making the task of defining a single Korean cultural identity, for example, increasingly difficult. According to Moreira (2017), the fragmentation of national identity and empathy towards North Koreans is more evident in younger generations, born in a globalized world without any memory of a united peninsula. Therefore, contrary to what is preached by the South Korean government, it is possible to affirm that, today, there is already a deep identity gap between South and North Koreans. The union of these factors leads to the hypothesis that, given the current scenario of both nations, North Korea and South Korea are closer to a conflict than to a reunification (SOUZA, 2017).

The imminence of a conflict between the two Koreas supports Vidigal's (2006) argument that, although globalization has caused a redefinition of the State's role regarding its dependence on other nations - as well as International

Organizations and non-governmental actors - they continue to be the main actors in international relations. Since States are the central agents of change when it comes to the balance of power and the maintenance of peace in the International System. Even so, according to Rotberg (2002), today "More is required of the modern state, too, than ever before". In the 21st century, a nation without well-maintained trade and security connections poorly serves its citizens and, according to the author, when governments refuse or cannot provide essential services to all its citizens, failure looms (ROTBERG, 2002). This statement proves itself to be true specially in the North Korean case, where these characteristics are already seen, and the situation still intensifies because of the destructive decisions taken by its individualistic leaders that have paved the way for the total failure of the North Korean state.

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON THE CONFLICT

Another aspect that cannot be left out of this analysis are the external influences on the conflict, especially the influences of China and the United States as the greatest world powers. It is worth mentioning that the beginning of these

countries' interest in the conflict between the Koreas is not recent, it started during the Cold War when the then socialist bloc supported North Korea and the US supported South Korea during the Korean War. Even with the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (and the socialist bloc), capitalist and socialist ideologies are still present in the Korean peninsula through the economic and military influence of China and the US in the region.

China, due to its solid diplomacy, characterized by its non-violent resolution of conflicts, manages to dialogue with both Korean governments, serving as a bridge to north-south dialogue. In addition, the Chinese presence on the peninsula is also due to its historical influence on political and security decisions in the region, a characteristic that has not lost strength over time, but which continues to be present and even justifies its position as a conciliator between North Korea, South Korea, and other countries (RAMALHO, 2013).

As pointed out by Souza and Darsie (2018), conserving North Korea as a socialist ally is part of the Chinese strategy to keep this region safe from future invasions and specially to keep US military forces at bay. It can be added that China's interests in the Korean

Peninsula go beyond security issues, also passing through the geopolitical and economic sectors, intensifying trade between these countries. As is the case of its economic cooperation with Pyongyang within the Northeast Asia revitalization plan, facilitating trade between North Korea and the provinces of the Northeast region of China (RAMALHO, 2013). In addition, China continues to maintain a good relationship with the neighboring nation, as, aside from following the same ideological strand, North Korea's geographic position serves as a barrier against invasions in the Manchuria region (SOUZA; DARSIE, 2018).

For North Korea, the partnership with China is essential for its survival as a sovereign nation, since, by investing a large part of its annual revenue in security and having a low participation in foreign trade, the country is not capable of meeting its internal needs, a fact that aggravates the country's deep social inequalities and keeps it dependent on Chinese aid.

Therefore, in general, China's greatest interest in stabilizing the Korean Peninsula is preserving North Korea's status quo, keeping the regime unchanged and, consequently, maintaining its dependence on China, which guarantees Chinese influence in

the country (RAMALHO, 2013). Furthermore, by persuading the Koreans to deepen their ties and maintain peaceful relations, China undermines American influence in the region, remaining a relevant and legitimate regional power (SOUZA; DARSIE, 2018).

As for the United States, its main interest in the region revolves around international security. For the American government, North Korea began to be seen as a threat to security when the country announced, in 2003, its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and admitted having nuclear weapons in its territory (SOUZA; DARSIE, 2018). Thus, North Korea became part of the so-called Axis of Evil within the American fight against international terrorism (NYE JR., 2002). In this case, with an approach focused mainly on the total denuclearization of the country (BUSH, 2002/2003).

One of the strategies adopted by the American government to try to change this situation was to adopt an uncompromising stance in relation to Pyongyang, demanding that the country abandon its nuclear program before any bilateral negotiations begin. This strategy proves to be inefficient, given North Korea's unwavering stance in relation to

its nuclear program and its distrust of the United States' intentions towards the socialist regime and its national security (BRITES, 2014 apud SOUZA; DARSIE, 2018).

Even though it is considered a threat to international security, the crisis on the Korean peninsula still manages, in some way, to be advantageous for the United States. Through it the country is able to strengthen its relations with its allies in the region, especially with South Korea and Japan, and as a result it maintains a greater military presence in the Far East (SOUZA; DARSIE, 2018). Indeed, by sustaining a military contingent in this region, the US is also gaining yet another way to demonstrate power in the context of its trade war against China.

Consequently, the image of the conflict is presented as follows: China works in favor of stability in the region, aiming to eliminate the American presence and sustain the regime's permanence in North Korea, as it is an important regional ally. The US, on the other hand, profits more from the peninsula's instability and, therefore, fights for the failure of the North Korean state and for the end of socialism in the world. Amid this, the reunification of the peninsula seems unlikely, both because of the external influence and the social

distance that previously united the imaginary of unity at the two extremes of the peninsula (MOREIRA, 2017).

Even so, while the imagery of a single Korean identity is decaying, the idea of unification itself remains a strong moral measure within the Korean peninsula. As explained by Moreira (2017), the main argument in favor of unification in the 21st century is the possible economic growth of the peninsula. For this reason, according to the author, rather than appealing for emotional reasons, the best way to increase public interest in unification would be to promote the economic benefits it would supposedly bring to the Korean people. The argument here is that bringing together the work of the North and the technological power of the South would lead to a strong Korean economy, invigorated and ready for the new millennium. (YONHAP, 2014; KOREAN TIMES, 2015 apud MOREIRA, 2017)

CONCLUSION

Given the overview of the Korean Peninsula, the question arises as to what kind of peace would be possible for the region. The big dilemma is that there is no consensus within this debate. As exposed by Kim (2014), some authors argue that the regime will collapse, as

happened with other communist nations, leaving a trail of destruction behind, while other authors argue that the status quo will not change. There is also a group of those who claim that the nation will follow the Chinese example and make changes gradually, in order to avoid the fragmentation of the State (KIM, 2014).

Although it is very difficult to make predictions about the unfolding of tensions in the Korean Peninsula, it is possible to imagine that a war would not benefit either side. Making use of Nye's (2002) argument, in today's world, the use of force is a threat to the economic goals of the great powers (such as China, the United States and South Korea, in this case). For the author, even non-democratic states, less submissive to international morality, ought to consider the impacts of war on their economic goals, as it is less acceptable today than a century or even half a century ago (NYE JR., 2002).

While the reignite of the war is unlikely, reunification also seems to generate debates about its likelihood and benefits. As mentioned above, the dissociation of identity between nations would generate high costs for the peninsula in the event of a reunification, both in the economic sphere and in the sociocultural realm, requiring great

efforts from the Korean authorities to promote the rapprochement of the Korean peoples (MOREIRA, 2017; LEE, 2013).

In conclusion, taking into consideration the situation presented so far it can be indicated that if the parties are interested in dialoguing - through the bridge of dialogue established by China - one of the possible options for the peninsula's near future is the construction of a "Cold Peace", following the term proposed by Boris Yeltsin (apud HUNTINGTON, 1996). This juncture would be considered peaceful because neither party wants to engage in a direct war, knowing its consequences. But it would be a "Cold Peace" because, even without a military conflict, North Korea remains a socialist-individualist State among an Asian community that is increasingly open to the economic benefits of globalization, a point that remains decisive in the process of integrating a country into the international community.

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Notes

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² Signed between the commanders of the United Nations forces and the Communist forces on July 27, 1953, created a security system that would prevent the new break of the war but would not stop military conflicts under the non-hostility clauses of the agreement.