Anti-Americanism and realignment in the two Koreas

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For all their differences, the expressions of anti-Americanism that erupted this winter in South Korea and North Korea convey a common desire. They were distinctly post-Cold War events, not just because Koreans are pursuing national sovereignty independently of the USA, but more importantly because they are symptoms of an aspiration for a new northeast Asian capitalist community, which the two Koreas and their neighbouring states have begun to envision for their collective future.

The appeal for a new northeast Asian community has emerged as a ‘spatial and temporal fix’ to the crisis of capitalism in Asia, especially in South Korea and Japan. Whereas South Korea emulated the USA and Japan during the Cold War, it is now collaborating with Japan to configure a northeast Asian economic bloc comparable to the European Union. The economic bedrock of the Cold War in the area was a series of bilateral relationships between Asian countries and the USA that inhibited the former from developing multilateral relations with other parts of the world, let alone among themselves. National identity was either conflated with or diametrically opposed to US imperialism. Examples include the participation of Japan and South Korea in the Korean and the Vietnam wars respectively, the anti-American movement in South Korea during the 1980s, and the persistent discourse of ‘the postwar’ that continues to hold the US occupation accountable for social and cultural unevenness in Japan. If neither the Koreans nor the Japanese had been capable of imagining an Asian economic community during the Cold War, the emerging fetish of the Asian community under the current economic crisis distinguishes the post-Cold War era. Restrictions on imports to the US market have disrupted the economic growth of Japan since the late 1970s and South Korea since the late 1980s. With the trauma of the 1997 IMF crisis and the subsequent consolidation of neoliberal reforms, a northeast Asian community is now seen as an alternative to dependence on US capital and markets.

In South Korea, participants and spectators of the current anti-American protests have expressed both resolve and anxiety about the USA. Last November, about a million candlelight protesters in South Korea flooded a central district of Seoul; and the protest still continues on a smaller scale. At first they demanded that South Korea and the USA reform their State of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which, since the mid-1960s, has granted a routine amnesty to thousands of US civilians and military personnel guilty of crimes, including two soldiers responsible for the death of two schoolgirls last June. The scale and the tone of this anti-Americanism have surprised Koreans as much as the outside world. For the sceptics of the proliferating NGO movement, the protest is a sign that political unity is still possible in the age of fragmented movements. For
others, who conflate globalization with transnationalism, the recent anti-American sentiment is a return to the nationalist chauvinism of the past. Afraid of undermining an already contested relationship between South Korea and the USA, or discouraging foreign investors, some politicians and intellectuals construe the protest as merely a reaction to the past – a move to offset the past hierarchical relationship between the two countries.

Netizens

The most prominent sign of anxiety is, however, the call for spontaneity from individual participants. Self-expression and unconventional forms of public protest must, it is said, supersede the conventional practices of social movements. This orientation is a trademark of the new virtual citizens or ‘netizens’ who emerged as the organizing force of the November candlelight vigil. Since June 2002, a long-standing unification organization (Pomminryon), in collaboration with several dozen social movement organizations and NGOs, endeavoured in vain to organize protests against the schoolgirls’ deaths. However, it was not until November that the protest began to take off, due to mobilization via the Internet. To express their opposition to the US war against Iraq, netizens have opened the candlelight vigils to the global antiwar and peace movement, distancing themselves from established movements that still focus on the bilateral relationship between South Korea and the USA. Fearing desertion by this emergent netizen crowd, the media, politicians and well-known movement organizations have sought to follow their voice. Accordingly, the candlelight vigils have been given the status of a new politics in which participants lead the movement, reversing the usual institutional formula for social movements and signalling an attempt to reclaim popular space from organized politics.

The insistence on spontaneity signifies a desire for democratic expression that conventional social movements have failed to fulfil. Although this spontaneous politics is linked to a worldwide youth culture, the participation of diverse age groups and a pervasive fascination with spontaneity situates the spectacle within a social crisis that poses wider problems of representation. The simultaneous progression since the 1990s of long-awaited democratization and sweeping market liberalization has prevented various established organizations from comprehending the current situation. Flourishing NGOs tend to espouse liberalism instead of censuring it. For instance, the economic concerns of leading NGOs include the monopoly of
conglomerates, the rights of small stockholders of conglomerates, and corruption; only recently have they begun to discuss the problem of the growing number of part-time workers. Labour unions have abandoned the role they played in the 1980s and have become more like interest groups for employees of conglomerates than a vanguard for the majority of workers who are not unionized. Human rights organizations continue to represent the victims of the previous authoritarian regime, such as tortured and long-term prisoners and families of the disappeared. In this context, the candlelight protests are opening a space for various groups and generations who have ambivalent and contradictory feelings about neoliberal democracy.

This search for a new democratic expression involves a capitalist dream that includes North Korea. The nuclear conflict with the USA has successfully pressured North Korea to stop procrastinating and start implementing its plan for market reform as a gesture to offset the US portrayal of North Korean military ambition and to sustain ongoing negotiations over economic cooperation with South Korea, Russia, China and Japan. In South Korea this has rekindled public support for the state’s Sunshine Policy of engagement with North Korea, implemented since 1998. The new policy of engagement centres on economic cooperation between the two Koreas and is called ‘national cooperation’ (minjok kongcho). This is the post-Cold War replacement for the earlier South Korea–USA cooperation (hanmi kongcho) and North Korea’s negotiations first with the USA and later with South Korea (somnihunan). National cooperation further consolidates capitalist hegemony over both the form and the process of Korean unification, which has been increasingly economic since the 1990s. This is evident in the transformation of national cooperation from trade and subcontracting, mediated by Korean diasporas, to the direct investment of South Korean capital in the market reform in North Korea. According to the South Korean business community, North Korean labourers are cheaper yet better skilled than their Han Chinese or Korean Chinese counterparts, whom South Korean firms have previously relied upon. North Korea emerges not just as a market for South Korean surplus production but also as a promising new site for investment in industrial production.

A new regional bloc

The enthusiasm of South Koreans for North Korea’s imminent capitalist future is marked by a distinctive historical time consciousness. Although economic liberalization has failed to deliver on its long promised redistribution of wealth, the trauma of the 1997 IMF crisis nonetheless invoked the spectre of developmentalism. Deregulated foreign capital performed the dirty work for South Korean capital in mobilizing diverse sectors of society to rally for national unity in support of capitalist expansion. In the current historical juncture, where the nation’s cultural appeal is significantly reduced, the memory of the IMF transports the radiant dreams of the past into the future. Will the opening of the North Korean market alleviate the social crisis, taming the neoliberal capitalist drive of the 1990s, which expanded the part-time labour force to more than half the total labour force, eliminating job security, and reducing the size of the middle class? When neoliberal reforms have emptied out the meaning of democracy in the economic sphere, will the capitalist dream for North Korea help to reconcile democratization and economic growth? While South Koreans are condemning US imperialism, they are oblivious to their own fascination with North Korea, which may not be as imperialistic as America’s, but is just as inequitable. The construction of the American Other – whether in the form of enchantment (the antiwar movement; the internationalism of NGOs) or denunciation (anti-Americanism) – deters Koreans from confronting their own social reality in the present.

North Korea constitutes the last link in the chain of the northeast Asian economic bloc. Whereas China and Russia steadily expanded their economic relations with South
Korea throughout the post-Cold war era, they only began to normalize relations with North Korea in the late 1990s, pledging aid and further cooperation. Japan and North Korea have reached a milestone in their process of normalization by agreeing on a package of compensation, instead of reparation, for the colonial occupation of Korea by Japan. (At present, officially, normalization is momentarily stalled because of Japan’s fury over the abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korean security agents.) A shared vision of a northeast Asian bloc has enabled each neighbouring country to form trilateral relations with the two Koreas. This vision foresees the trans-Siberian freight route linking the natural resources and manpower of Russia and North Korea with the capital, technology and surplus production of South Korea, Japan, and even China. An Asian economic community is projected not only to consolidate relations among northeast Asian players but also to expand its power into Europe and Southeast Asia. The actualization of this community is forestalled by other territorial disputes, competition for hegemony, and disagreement over the US war against Iraq. Yet the crisis of capitalism in Asian countries invigorates the aspiration for unity. These are favourable circumstances for South Korea, Japan, Russia and China to oppose US aggression against North Korea, which they regard as threatening the sovereignty of North Korea and the military power of China – often said to be the true target of the US offensive in North Korea – as well as threatening their common interests, just as they are beginning to coalesce.

Some of the interests of both the US and North Korea appear to have been fulfilled already as a result of their nuclear stand-off, possibly obviating the need for what would be a widely unpopular war between them. Heightened military tension accompanied by a surge in anti-Americanism in the Korean peninsula might help the US kill two birds with one stone. First, it gives the US administration a rationale to execute its plan to withdraw its troops from South Korea without giving up this strategic post in Asia. Second, it may enable the US to replace its groundforce-based security programme with a missile defence programme. In addition to enabling North Korea to leverage more US aid, the nuclear tension inadvertently enables North Korea to temper the speed of national cooperation under the control of South Korean capital. It also offers North Korea an opportunity to boost its declining legitimacy with the people of both South and North Korea in the wake of North Korea’s rampant famines. The peace treaty with the USA demanded by North Korea is superior to the South Korean proposal for making the Korean peninsula nuclear free. For whereas the South Korean proposal requires the two Koreas to eliminate nuclear weapons, but fails to prohibit the USA from bringing nuclear weapons to the peninsula in an emergency, the North Korean proposal categorically prohibits the use of nuclear weapons by all sides – including the USA. The peace treaty is capable of lending North Korea political currency in the process of putative national cooperation and the construction of a northeast Asian economic community.

Anti-Americanism, a conscious distancing of oneself from it, and the insistence on spontaneity, all suggest a crisis of representation. They highlight an undeniable desire for a new national-popular space that has yet to be fully defined. The North Korean state is an accomplice in the construction of neoliberal structures that are producing these energies in South Korea and are propelling the countries of northeast Asia to envisage their unity.