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“Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea: Legitimacy of Foundation and 60 Years of Struggle for Sovereignty”.

In 2008 Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (the DPRK) celebrates 60th anniversary of its foundation. The establishment of the DPRK was announced on September 8, 1948 in Pyongyang less than a month after the foundation of Republic of Korea (the ROK) had been declared in Seoul (August 15, 1948). Thus after-war reconstruction of post-colonial civil and political institutions on Korean peninsular resulted in national division as a logic consequence of rising confrontation between the two superpowers and irreconcilable ideological polarization of national political forces. Legitimacy of the ROK was based on parliamentary elections held in the Southern part of the peninsular under the supervision of US initiated UN temporary commission on Korea on May 10, 1948, while legitimacy of the DPRK relied on alternative elections which were held on August 25, 1948 in the Northern part of Korean peninsular where previous elections had been boycotted. In fact the announcements of both states foundation were the attempts to consolidate legally dual power or diarchy which had been established on Korean peninsular by 1948.

Taking into consideration formal and informal legitimacy of the ROK and the DPRK foundation one should admit the fact that both states were widely treated by historical and political scientists as client regimesⁱ established with the support of Soviet and US military administrations which overtook power from Japanese colonial government on Korean Peninsular to the North and the South from 38 parallel. Such artificial partition of Korean peninsular by coalition forces was made in line with the accords of Yalta conference (February 1945) on post-war world order held by the USSR, the USA and the United Kingdom leaders. The US position on Korean problem at that conference was to introduce up to 30 years trusteeship (same as in case of Philippines) of 4 states (the USSR, the USA, United Kingdom and China) in order to ensure gradual resurrection of democratic national state on Korean peninsularⁱⁱ. This stance was opposed by the Soviet party's position which insisted on immediate creation of provisional Korean government upon the liberation of the peninsular with no foreign trusteeship. Final compromised decision was reached in Moscow during the meeting of foreign ministers of the USSR, the USA and the United Kingdom (December 1945). In a final declaration of Moscow meeting it was stated that: “in order to restore Korea as an independent state, to create conditions for democratic development and to overcome fatal consequences of long-term Japanese domination in Korea, Provisional democratic government will be formed to carry out all the necessary measures for industry, infrastructure, agriculture and national culture development”ⁱⁱⁱ. Joint commission of Soviet and US military administration was envisaged to enhance the formation of such provisional government.

In fact the joint commission envisaged by Moscow December meeting started its work in January 1946 but failed to exercise its mission due to the growing antagonism between the two superpowers. Negotiations which were mainly concentrated on economic issues such as the pattern of exchange of Southern rice for Northern electricity were dropped as early as May 1946 and joint attempts to solve

political issues through the formation of provisional government which started in March 1947 were finally abandoned in May. By that time each party blamed another for the failure of the talks and each party actually left free hand for its own interference into state-creating process on Korean peninsular. The obvious result was the formation of two states with both leaders Kim Il Sung and Syngman Rhee being direct protégés with close links to the USSR and the USA correspondently.

From external point of view formal admission of elections in the South by UN temporary commission on Korea put the DPRK state legitimacy to a weaker position. Yet if one looks in-depth into the situation from inside he would have to admit that postcolonial political atmosphere on Korean peninsular was totally dominated by revolutionary nationalism favored both by conservatives and communists. Popular leftist movements was a significant political force both in the South and the North and suppressive policies against this movement staged immediately after occupation by American military administration in fact completely undermined the Korean people's efforts to establish independent political system on the peninsular. "By creating a separate regime in the South (the First Republic), the US military government privileged the establishment of a capitalist market economy and an anti-communist state over the establishment of a democratic political order. Thus while publicly challenging the ideas of democracy, the occupational forces crushed popular democratic demands and helped Syngman Rhee establish autocratic power over a forcibly depoliticized society."^{iv} That policy was quite in line with US postwar global strategy which put priority to deterrence of communist expansion supported by the USSR and Korean peninsular was considered by the USA to be one of the major anti-communist bulwarks in Asia.

On the other hand it would be too primitive to treat the DPRK as a brutal instrument of foreign domination and a mere imposition of a Soviet-derived system lacking legitimate revolutionary credentials. On the contrary archive materials prove that "North Korea was not a simple Soviet satellite, but evolved from a somewhat decentralized coalition regime based on wide-spread "people's committees" in 1945-1946, to a period of relative Soviet dominance in 1947-1948, thence in 1949 to important ties with China, which in turn provided a realm of maneuver for the DPRK between the two communist giants"^v. From that point of view political state in the North was to the less extend a classic Soviet puppet or a pure form of "Stalinism in the East" and to the more extend independent-oriented national state spontaneously established by revolutionized masses or *minjung* in Korean and in this sense a political structure more immanent to national-popular collective will than to power enforced from outside.

Unfortunately joint intervention of Korean peninsular and growing rivalry between the USSR and the USA made it impossible for various Korean political groups to consolidate around the common axis of nationalism and facilitate the emergence of national consensus. On the contrary growing "cold war" confrontation polarized political terrain on Korean peninsular. In other words without having given their consent the Korean people became victims of the US and the Soviet strategic interests in the region. Dictate imposed by superpower interests in the long run undermined all their efforts to create genuinely independent and politically legitimate state in both parts of divided Korean peninsular.

Quite understandably after announcement of the ROK the USA was the first country to give diplomatic recognition (late August, 1948) to Seoul and consequently to sign bilateral agreement on friendship and trade (December 10, 1948). Similarly after foundation of the DPRK the USSR was the first country to install diplomatic relations with Pyongyang (October 12, 1948) and sign bilateral treaty on economic and cultural cooperation (March 17, 1949). Yet due to US dominance in the United Nation at that time Soviet recognition of the DPRK was swiftly followed only by satellite states from Socialist bloc: Mongolia Peoples Republic, Poland Peoples Republic, Czechoslovakia Socialist Republic, Socialist Republic of Rumania, Hungary Peoples Republic, Peoples Republic of Bulgaria, Peoples Republic of Albania, and later upon their foundation by Peoples Republic of China, German Democratic Republic and Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Of course this limited outward recognition could be a curtain challenge to the DPRK international legitimacy.

The more tragic consequence of created diarchy was the fact that each state claimed its sole legitimacy for the whole Korean peninsular. Eventually mutual desire to re-unify the nation by force resulted in destructive civil war initiated by the DPRK due to its military superiority at the moment backed by inadequate international legitimacy mentioned above. This civil war known to the world as Korean war of 1950-1953 was eventually joined directly or indirectly by major superpowers bringing the world on the brink of a new world war, in fact destructive nuclear war. Korean war which perished the whole peninsular and in three years ended where it started was unconditionally perceived by the West as the North's aggression officially condemned by UN resolution. Therefore the ROK was internationally treated as victim of that aggression in need of foreign support and assistance. On the other hand whereas before the war the ROK had a weak local base of support, the war gave the state an ideological basis for building its legitimacy. Anti-communism became the premier motif for ideological legitimization of the ROK and Korean peninsular military demarcation line was considered to become a final firewall to spreading communism.

Though in the DPRK the results of Korean war were interpreted as a "historical victory over American imperialism" in reality the label of "aggressor" narrowed opportunities for international political recognition. Thus in the after-war period the DPRK could rely only on relations with limited number of socialist block countries with even larger political and military dependence on the USSR and Peoples Republic of China. Moreover the DPRK potential attempts to diversify its economic relations with outside world were blocked by UN Resolution as of May 18, 1951 which envisaged total embargo on trade with alleged aggressor. For the regime based on post colonial idea of national revival that was a serious inferiority complex and the origin of *Juche* ideology in late 1950-s was a logical response to the situation. In a way it was an attempt to establish real political sovereignty in contrast to the ROK total political, military and economic dependence on the USA. In doing so the DPRK skillfully exploited growing Sino-Soviet tension manipulating superpower patrons to its own agendas and effectively grasped the opportunities to expand its international recognition among emerging "third world" post-colonial community.

Rapidly changing world map of 1950-s and 1960-s gave the DPRK a new chance. Rapid collapse of colonial rule with emergence of numerous new independent states in Asia and Africa created wide opportunities for expanding international legitimacy. That chance was explored both by the ROK and the DPRK. In fact 1960-s was the time when unofficial political competition between the DPRK and the ROK on world arena took the form of staging diplomatic relations with as much liberated countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America as possible. From late 1960-s the DPRK had even attempted to distance itself from the socialist camp limiting economic integration within COMECON and positioning itself as “third world” country. The initial steps of “third world”-oriented policies could be traced as early as 1955 when the DPRK was first invited to New Delhi (India) for the Conference of Asia People. In 1956 the DPRK actively supported nationalization of Suez channel by Egypt and by the end of the decade it effectively managed to overcome the “imperialists” blockade by establishing diplomatic relations with India, Indonesia, Burma, Egypt and Iraq.

In 1960-s and early 1970-s on-going Asian recognition (the DPRK set diplomatic relations with Cambodia, Ceylon, Yemen, Algeria, Syria and Pakistan) was expanded to liberated countries in Tropical Africa (Guinea, Togo, Somalia, Congo, Ghana, Ivory Coast) and Latin America (Chile, Argentina, Venezuela and Costa Rica). To consolidate its position in the ‘third world’ the DPRK persistently participate in the work of various international political organizations such as Afro-Asian Economic Council, Organization for Solidarity of Asian and African Peoples, World Peace Council and others. In 1971 Pyongyang establish diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia, the dissident socialist state and major protagonist of Non-Alignment Movement paving the way to membership in this influential organization. In several cases Pyongyang even took the burden of hosting international events (Asian conference on radio broadcasting, Asian Economic Seminar, Conference on Prospects of Economic Development of Liberated Countries).

The DPRK foreign diplomacy among “third world” countries at that time was much more aggressive than that of the ROK, which gave priority to economic issues. Pyongyang obsession with gaining quantitative superiority over the ROK in diplomatic recognition among foreign countries led in many cases to political unscrupulousness resulted in setting diplomatic relations with rather odious dictator and anti-popular regimes. Moreover since 1970-s the DPRK started attempts to render economic aid to its partners in the “third world”. In 1970-s some 34 developing countries (among them 26 African countries) received economic assistance from the DPRK which totaled US\$28 million^{vi}. By mid-1980-s overall economic aid of the DPRK to “third world” countries amounted to US\$150 million^{vii}. Judging by rather small volume of aid received by each recipient (less than US\$1 million) it could mainly serve political and ideological aims.

Generally that assistance was provided in the form free aid to overcome natural disasters, non-repayable loans for North Korean consumer goods, assistance in construction of agricultural and light-industry projects, erection of cultural and sports facilities, dispatch of North Korean specialists, free education of foreign students in North Korean universities and military aid. According to the DPRK sources in early 1980-s over 50 thousand North Korean specialists were working in 50 developing

countries. The country was rendering assistance in the construction of 30 industrial projects (food, ceramics, textile and cement plants) in 22 countries, 20 irrigation projects were under work^{viii}. North Korean doctors were dispatched to introduce modern medicine to newly liberated African countries and North Korean specialists were sent to assist in erection of congress halls (in Burundi, Guinea and Mali), sports complexes (in Yemen Arab Republic) and other cultural facilities. Most of that assistance was given to African countries and particularly to Nigeria, Tanzania, Guinea, Ghana, Mali, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia.

Special attention was paid by North Korean leadership to military assistance. Due to its ideological commitments the DPRK provide military support to various anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and sometimes simply anti-government movements in the “third world” countries. On the list of recipients of its military aid we could find MPLA in Angola, SWAPO in Namibia, ZANU in Rhodesia, FROLINAT in Chad and POLISARIO in Western Sahara. At first stage military assistance included training of guerilla methods of war by North Korean instructors in the DPRK or on the spot and supplies of light weaponry and ammunition^{ix}. Later those supplies were widened to more sophisticated weapons like short range missiles.

Such challenging foreign diplomatic offence in the “third world” brought its fruits. In 1975 the DPRK became full member of Non-Alignment Movements as the meeting of foreign ministers of the movement in Lima (Peru) accepted its application for membership while rejecting similar application from the ROK. That was the time when the DPRK joined “Group 77”, the United Nation Conference on Trade and Development and staged active diplomacy in many other international organizations. As a result by 1975 DPRK managed to neutralize pro-Seoul stance of the United Nations on Korean problem mainly due to quantitative support from liberated countries. Political recognition by the “third world” paid economic dividends as well: by early 1980-es the DPRK managed to expand the number of its trade partners to 100 from only 30 developing countries in 1960-s with almost one third of its trade turnover going to that region. Ideology gave way to pragmatism especially in dealing with oil-producing countries of Middle East. That was the time when the DPRK established stable economic relations with Iraq, Iran and Syria bartering its military products for badly need oil. Encouraged by this developments the DPRK Parliament adopted in 1983 special resolution “On Strengthening Cooperation within the Framework of “South-South” Relations”.

Much more 1970-s witnessed a break through in the DPRK political isolation from Western countries. In 1973-1975 Pyongyang established diplomatic relations with Austria, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Portugal, Finland, Switzerland, Sweden and Australia. This success was forestalled by two decades of persistent efforts to establish trade relation with developed capitalist states first through mediators in Hong Kong and Singapore, later in cooperation with non-governmental organizations of several West European countries, Japan and Australia and finally with commerce chambers of such countries as France, Germany and Great Britain. Rapid increase in raw material prices in 1970-s forced Western companies to search for more alternative and cheap supplies of those products. That gave the DPRK chance to diversify export of its iron ore, coal and non-ferrous metals to capitalist market. That laid foundation to intensive growth of North Korean trade relations with Japan and European Community.

Much of hard currency revenues received from raw material export to those countries was channeled back to purchase Western machinery, equipment and even luxury items. Several Japanese and European banks opened credit lines for those deals and by mid-1970-s trade turnover with developed capitalist countries exceeded trade volumes with socialist camp.

Unfortunately situation on raw material markets abruptly changed and with downward price tendency for major North Korean export items and on-going rise in prices on imported items in 1976 the DPRK failed on due repayment of its debts. That default stopped the DPRK short from long-awaited diplomatic recognition by political heavyweights like Germany, Great Britain, France and possibly even Japan. Moreover the credit crises downplayed previous North Korean diplomatic achievements in the West. North Korean trade flops on Western markets coincided and so much contrasted to emerging economic power of the ROK which used aggressive and successful export-oriented strategy as a major tool of its foreign diplomacy. Quite interestingly the North Korean 1976 credit crises was the first ever default of a socialist country to the West in the post war period and the pattern of it was quite similar to near-default situation in the USSR during Gorbachev rule which actually resulted in disintegration of the Soviet Union and socialist camp as well.

Gorbachev *perestroika* policies which led to collapse of East European “people democracies” and consequent disintegration of the USSR had a huge influence on the DPRK. Counter to all previous accords Soviet leadership in 1990 unilaterally decided to establish diplomatic relations with the ROK. Within the next two years cautious China had to follow the suite. Those developments totally ruined existing status quo, when political recognition of the ROK by the Soviet Union and Peoples Republic of China was considered to be a pre-requisite for US and Japan’s consent to establish diplomatic relations with the DPRK. In this situation Pyongyang had no choice but to yield to the ROK proposal on simultaneous admission of both states to the United Nations which North Korean leadership always objected reasoning that it could only consolidate the division of Korean peninsular. As a result both countries were admitted to the United Nations in 1991 and in less than two decades to follow this organization happened to be headed by citizen of the ROK.

To make it worse early in 1990-s the USA raised the issue of the DPRK secrete development of nuclear weaponry. With Russia’s total abundance of Soviet security commitments and swift support of US stance on that problem the DPRK found itself in quite an awkward position. Overreaction on external pressure reflected in North Korean announcement of its exit from the Agreement on non-proliferation of nuclear weaponry which the country joined in 1985 brought Korean peninsular on the brink of war. In June 1994 the USA was seriously preparing for military strike and large scale ground operation on the territory of the DPRK, which could led to humanitarian disaster^x, was stopped short by last-minute President Carter good-will visit to Pyongyang and a sudden decease of North Korean permanent leader Kim Il Sung on July 8, 1994. Judging by catastrophic economic situation in the DPRK the latter event was viewed by many including South Korean President Kim Young Sam (who was ready to introduce marital law in the ROK) as North Korean last step down to inevitable collapse. May be that was also one

of the reasons for the USA to sign in October the same year in Geneva bilateral frame agreement with the DPRK which they hopefully thought they might not need to follow.

The only positive development in the 1990-s for the DPRK was the resumption in 1991 of inter-Korean dialogue. Basic achievement of those negotiations was de facto admission of the existence of two states on Korean peninsular. And although this dialogue was interrupted by nuclear issue and by later Kim Il Sung decease, the 1991 accords laid seeds for the fruits to be harvested later during Kim Dae-jung presidency. In spite of general expectations the DPRK managed to survive its founder's decease and by 1999 it became obvious that late Kim's son Kim Jong-Il had smoothly succeeded all political power. He proved to be capable to overcome at least partially economic disaster of mid-1990. Moreover by testing in August 1998 its first ballistic missile Kim Jong-Il reminded the outer world the "the patient looks more like alive than dead".

The first one to notice that changes was South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, who in line with his "Sun-shine" policy towards the North in June 2000 made a historical trip to Pyongyang for the first-ever Korean summit meeting with Kim Jong-Il. The summit drew much international attention and abruptly changed the North Korean image of isolated rogue state. 2000 witnessed Kim Jong-Il visit to China (May), first-ever summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Pyongyang (July) and US state secretary (October). There were even talks on visit of US President Bill Clinton to Pyongyang. Next year Pyongyang was visited by "three big" of European Community (May) and Japanese Premier (September). Unimaginable success of North Korean foreign diplomacy was based personal charisma of Kim Jong-Il and Pyongyang eagerness to solve nuclear issue. By that time the DPRK managed to establish diplomatic relations with more than 20 states including almost EC countries, yet the USA, Japan and France were not in that list.

Then came September 11, 2001, the DPRK was pin pointed to "the axis of evil" and all Pyongyang expectations for changes in its balancing *juche* policies from "the USSR – China Peoples Republic" to "China Peoples Republic - the USA" and eventually to get political recognition from the USA and Japan doomed to disappointment. That is not the first time that North Korean leadership found itself in such situation. The DPRK has hopelessly lost its economic competition with the ROK. It has been left far behind in international political contest as well and the only effective tool to enhance the North Korean sovereignty and legitimacy happened to be nuclear and missile "sticks". At present the DPRK is trying to play these cards by balancing on the interests of neighboring powers. In this case political recognition of a sixty-year old regime which proved to be much more viable than expected by the USA and Japan could create quite a unique opportunities for changes in still "isolated rogue state from axis of evil". Why don't they try to follow the experiences of the USSR and China Peoples Republic in early 1990-s regarding the ROK?

ⁱ Harrison Selig S. Korean Endgame. Princeton, 2002 p.XIII

ⁱⁱ Vorontsov V.B. Korea in US Plans During World War II. Moscow, 1962 p.89

ⁱⁱⁱ The Soviet Union and Korean Issue. Documents. Moscow, 1948 p.6

^{iv} Choi Jang Jip Political Cleavages in South Korea. State and Society in Contemporary Korea. Cornell university, New York 1993 p.20

^v Cumings Bruce The Corporate State in North Korea. State and Society in Contemporary Korea. Cornell university, New York 1993 p.204

^{vi} The economy of Korean Democratic Peoples Republic 1945-1979.. Economic Policies and Trade Relations with Europe. –Kiel: German-Korea Studies Group, 1979 pp.81-82

^{vii} Kovalev A.F. Economic cooperation of Asian socialist countries with developing nations. Proceedings of IEWSS Conference 1985 p.58 (Russian)

^{viii} DPRK Foreign Trade. Pyongyang 1984 , #3 pp.1-8 (Russian)

^{ix} Journey to North Korea. Personal perception. Berkley 1983 p.326

^x See: Noland Markus Avoiding the Apocalypse. New York, 2000 p.149