

*This report is written by Kerstin Podere, researcher at Hanns Seidel Foundation Korea. It is a report on the 116<sup>th</sup> Foreign Scholar Seminar by the IFES on “The Historical and Contemporary Relationship between Korea and China“ held on May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2017 at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University, Seoul.*

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## **116<sup>th</sup> Foreign Scholar Seminar by the IFES - On the Historical and Contemporary Relationship between Korea and China**

Date: May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017, 2 p.m. –3:30 p.m.

Moderator: Prof. Sun Joun-yung, Chair Professor, Kyungnam University

Guest: Odd Arne Westad (S.T. Lee Professor of U.S.-Asia Relations, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University)

### **Introduction**

The Institute for Far Eastern Studies at Kyungnam University is a research-oriented think-tank that deals with international relations. The IFES promotes peace and the unification of Korea through scholarly contributions focusing on the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia. The IFES regularly invites experts to its Foreign Scholar Seminar. This week’s event focused on the historical and contemporary relationship between Korea and China. As an expert of this topic, the IFES invited Dr. Odd Arne Westad, Professor of U.S.-Asia Relations at Harvard University.

Prof. Sun Joun-yung, Chair Professor at the Kyungnam University, opened the 116<sup>th</sup> seminar and introduced Dr. Odd Arne Westad, who is an expert on contemporary international history and the eastern Asian region. Dr. Westad is the author of several publications and has won important prizes for his work. For “The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times,” Dr. Westad won the Bancroft Prize. His recent book, “Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750” was chosen for the Asia Society’s book award in 2013.

### **Summary**

At the beginning of the presentation, Dr. Westad characterized Korean-Chinese relations as “distorted” and “disharmonious,” while China was described as being highly interested in harmonic relations in the East Asian Region. Regarding this harmony in terms of Chinese approaches, there are two main elements that determine China’s behaviour. On the one hand, there are fears and worries, and on the other hand, there are also hopes for possibilities and opportunities in the future.

Dr. Westad explained that the role of China’s fears and that worries do not originate from the past. He argued that the past does not dictate today’s policies anymore. Those fears, according to Dr. Westad, rather originate from new outcomes in the international community.

#### *Fears and worries*

According to Dr. Westad, China’s biggest fear is a potential Korean unification on US promises and interest (politically or militarily), causing a new power structure in the East

Asian region. In terms of global thinking, this would be China's worst case scenario. The second fear China deals with, is the possible sudden collapse of the North Korean regime and the instability that would follow, especially concerning North Korea's domestic affairs. There are worries that long-term NK-internal instability could cause a spill over to other countries, increasing uncertainties in the region when China needs predictability for their policies.

### *Opportunities and possibilities*

On the other hand, there are also opportunities. South Korea holds remarkable significance for China, not only in economic, but also in political terms, and this importance is still increasing very fast. "This relationship is not a one-way street. When it comes to investments, China also gains from South Korea," Dr. Westad stated. There is also certain significance for South Korean "softpower," as a widespread admiration of Korean society exists among China. This attraction (even though it may not determine anything) also must be taken into consideration.

The second opportunity, Dr. Westad explained, relates to the fact that the Chinese government gets more and more aware they have "the wrong Korea", while "North Korea is an easy enemy, South Korea would be a better friend." Nevertheless, China's middle-term efforts on disarmament could be a facilitator for the region and would also be better for China's reputation itself. This leads to the third possibility: China needs to be globally seen as a world power. As North Korean policy is internationally seen negatively, and South Korean policy is seen positively, contributing the disarmament could give China a better stand.

### *Today's policy*

The current situation and power constellation can be considered long-term, and China prefers this stability. But from China's perspective, further stability becomes less likely. According to Dr. Westad, there are two reasons for this instability. First of all, there is the situation in North Korea itself, including the nuclear and missile policy. The second reason is the election of Trump as U.S. President, which could lead to a "recalibration of the situation".

For China there have been new uncertainties about North Korean policies since the assassination of Kim Jong Nam in the Philippines. For China, it is very important when and especially where the assassination happened, as it seems to have relations to specific events in China.<sup>1</sup> The North Korean policy seems not only to put up new difficulties regarding North Korea-South Korea relations, but also to North Korea-China relations. Since the assassination took place, China is even more sceptical about the sustainability of North Korea's policies.

Dr. Westad added that, in the past few months, there is a new fear among some (regionally thinking) experts, who are worried about North Korea spill over effects on other areas. "When North Korea is prepared to lose its only ally, what will happen to the Philippines or other countries?" Dr. Westad noted. Regarding these potential spill overs, China is concerned about further loss of influence in the region.

An important issue for the new South Korean administration, Dr. Westad advised, is to realize China's concerns in a positive way. The discussion often focuses on the missile systems, but China is a lot more concerned about the other issues mentioned.

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<sup>1</sup> China was about to make new foreign policies focusing on East Asia. The announcement for this policy was to be made in Kuala Lumpur.