

A User's Manual to North Korea

Matters and issues that shape relations between them and us

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In the beginning of this year, with a new and younger version of the Kim Dynasty in place as supreme leader in Pyongyang, a blog hosted by the International Herald Tribune, the global edition of the New York Times, suggested something worth considering. The blogger, Mark McDonald, wrote: "Here's a modest proposal for peace on the Korean Peninsula: Give the kid a break."

The reason was that the new leader, during another huge US and South Korean military maneuver, kept his military in check. He did not retaliate, although warships a few miles outside the North Korean coastline were firing live shells.

If North Korean warships did the same outside Incheon and Busan, would Seoul show the same patience and forbearance, asks the blogger. Or would the US accept if Cuba's Raúl Castro staged war-games off Miami?

The comment is interesting in two ways: it changes the perspective from our position to theirs, and consequently it underlines that there are at least two, but usually more, parties in the equation.

A majority of Western, and many South Korean, observers interpreted the non-action by Pyongyang differently, claiming that the new leader will act "when it suits him, in ways unexpected by his target." (Sung-yoon Lee, quoted from McDonalds Blog).

The boy has not yet got his break, and I will give my version of the reasons why changes are slow in our relations with North Korea, regardless which Kim we are relating to.

Let me first present the setting of my lecture – and thus also myself – by quoting from a book that I once read and lost, as it has influenced me a lot, actually more than I was aware of, until I recently got hold of another copy in a second-hand bookstore in Paris. The first paragraph of the Preface reads:

“It may be said of Korea that there is no country of comparable significance concerning which so many people are ignorant. For hundreds of years the Koreans sought safety in complete isolation, developing unique customs and a distinctive way of life. Since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, they have suffered deeply in the discovery that a nation cannot sustain its independence if it will not share in the general development of civilization. Shocked by violent Japanese, Russian, and American occupations, the Koreans now struggle for the restoration of their liberty and national dignity. As that effort, with its far-reaching implications, can affect the whole world, it has seemed desirable that the characteristics of Korean culture and the circumstances which led to their development should be made available, particularly to those whose obligation is the welfare of the sorely beset Koreans.” (Osgood 1951, p.v).

This was written in 1950, the year I was born, and published the year after. It is the preface of Cornelius Osgood’s book: *The Koreans and their Culture*. The first really serious book I read about Korea and its people.

Sixty years later Osgood’s comments still seem relevant. And his observations are obviously much more relevant regarding North Korea than they are regarding the South. Just right now the North Koreans suffer in the discovery that a nation – or a half one – cannot sustain its independence if it continues to avoid the outside world. And the shock of past occupations are maintained by an intense fear – motivated or not – of foreign military attacks. The present struggle for national independence and dignity make the regime over-emphasizing its military build-up, at the expense of the life and welfare of their own population.

North Korea is not an easy case to tackle, but – as Osgood remarked in 1950 – what happens on the Korean peninsula can have far-reaching implications and affect the whole world. This is as true today as it was then.

I have promised to offer *A User's Manual to North Korea*. The title might be misleading, as I am not suggesting finding ways to “operate” North Korea. But a new way to approach and relate to North Korea is needed, as most attempts up until now have failed or been inadequate. The subtitle of the lecture is: Matters and issues that shape relations between them and us. By this I want to signal a need to acknowledge that a focus on North Korea alone, its ideas and actions, is a dead end. The approach has to be relational. Not even North Korea exists in a vacuum (even if this is what they for years have claimed to prefer.)

A very basic, but often ignored premise in our observation of others is that we use a particular filter, acquired and developed through the process of upbringing (and to some extent education). We are all provided with a mental manual that usually enables us to manage our daily life. When we try to apply our acquired abilities to understand the world far outside our local domain, however, it's harder. It's often harder to make sense of what we see, hear or read about people and societies far from home. This is then usually explained by their cultural traits, traits that differ from ours.

While this is a banal observation, it is important for my argument to bear in mind that a discussion about North Korea usually – almost always – is deprived of this particular aspect. North Korea remains our *Axis of Evil* and *Outpost of Tyranny*, although those particular phrases are currently out of fashion. Their difference, it is inferred, is due to “brainwashing”. In our picture of them the North Koreans are clones fabricated by evil forces. This description in different shades, from grey to black, informs us through all kinds of media, about the Hermit *Kim*-dom. It renders it difficult, bordering the impossible, to engage on equal or *normal* terms with the North. So, let me make Osgood's words mine: it is still desirable that characteristics of Korean culture and the circumstances that led to their development are made available. And after that, it is to be hoped that those who try

to deal with North Korea remember to consider the impact of these cultural traits on their thinking and actions.

I have already indicated that as observers we are also coloured by something. Allow me therefore to share a couple of personal experiences in this field, before I continue to challenge the mainstream views. The first one relates to the poster announcing this lecture. I visited North Korea a number of times in the 1980s, when foreign visitors were rare. When I then came to South Korea in 1988, I was therefore perceived to be a kind of interesting person, not because anything I had achieved, but of the simple reason that I had been in the North several times. I was invited to share my experiences with staff from the Foreign Ministry in Seoul. They had never been up North, but they knew everything. For instance that the picture of the grey building one can see on the poster announcing this lecture was nothing but a Potemkin village, it was fake, they said, only a facade, not a real house.

Behind that facade, I told them, I had tea in the grand visitors' room, a place nicely decorated with thick carpets. I even used the gents! In that fake house there were flushing toilets and hot water to wash your hands. My hosts immediately changed subject. They did not want *their* picture disturbed.

The other experience, hard to forget, happened during the same visit to South Korea. I was invited to present my personal accounts from North Korea at a well-known university. The lecture room was huge, and it was filled to the last seat, as eye-witness impressions from North Korea seldom were offered. I started my talk by saying: dear fellow scholars, it is important for me, visiting your beautiful country, to share one strong impression with you: there are beautiful places in North Korea too, and the North Korean people are very much like you, hospitable, considerate, and nice....

This generated noise in the lecture room, and to my astonishment I saw the whole first row, where the university president and distinguished professors were seated, on their way out. I caught one sentence before the door slammed: "*we are not going to listen to communist propaganda.*"

In both cases I was hurting emotions. Disagreement is not enough to make decent, highly educated people break the etiquette, not in Korea, and hardly anywhere. North Korea and emotions are interrelated. I will come back to this later.

This happened a quarter of a century ago, before the end of the cold war. Are such experiences really relevant today? The unfortunate answer is yes. In the latest magazine of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs called *Development*, a letter to the editor expressed fury, because the previous issue of the magazine had brought pictures from North Korea showing daily scenes from Pyongyang, with ordinary normal-looking people, instead of the hunger-stricken infants in nurseries, military parades on Kim Il Sung Square or the slightly over weight, new young leader. In South Korea 25 years ago it was not accepted to depict people in the North as normal people, and today in our part of the world we have been so accustomed to dreadful descriptions and pictures from the North that nothing else is tolerated. We have been so used to see North Korea as a nightmarish, totalitarian, Stalinist, inhuman place on earth, that even glimpses of normality are dismissed as fake, untrue propaganda.

The angry letter to the editor of the magazine *Development* came from the headquarters of the Christian Democratic Party in Denmark. They, as well, know North Korea from the media, and became emotionally upset by seeing alternative images.

A word about media is in place here. I am a critical user. But I'm also happily sharing my ideas and views with the media. They are a curse and a blessing. We cannot do without them (then we would find ourselves in the same situation as most people in North Korea), but we could do without the worst examples. They are powerful in selecting information and shaping our views. Regarding North Korea, our media have to a large extent created an image which is a mix of what can be observed and with how this is interpreted by intelligence agencies in the West. By disseminating a very negative image only, the media contribute to prevent a more pro-active Western approach to North Korea. As an experienced foreign relations bureaucrat explained in Brussels: no serious European politician will risk to see his name on the front-page insinuating his support for a Stalinist

dictator in Pyongyang. In this case, media really matters, which is why it remains relevant for my presentation to discuss their role.

The personal experiences that I just shared with you are the reason why I believe that a new “manual” is needed. Or, as also suggested above, one could say that the existing manual to North Korea is problematic; it is worn out and needs to be renewed and updated. All information about North Korea in our part of the world seems to be filtered through the do’s and don’ts of such a manual. Suggested matters and issues to focus on are the inhumane dictatorship with a family clan monopolizing power, the oversized army and the clandestine nuclear development for military purposes, testing of long range missiles, the dreadful human rights situation with a focus on labour camps. Words like closed, aggressive, unpredictable, inscrutable, unreliable and the likes are recommended. The general advice of the manual is, always believe the worst and question positive information, *should it ever occur*.

Even if such a manual is non-existent as an actual item to be found at every chief-editor's desk around the world, media coverage of North Korea basically follows the pattern I just suggested. An alternative is “the-make-fun-of-North-Korea-approach”. Here images of leaders with a focus on funny hairstyles and bad dress codes, eccentric tastes and evil habits, dominate. And finally there is the suggestion of taking announcements from the propaganda outlets literally; translating word for word statements are highly recommended, with hilarious results.

What most people know about North Korea comes from the media, that is why they are important. Compared to its size and relative unimportance (in relation to all its neighbours), that little country in the far North-East of Asia manages to attract a lot of interest and the number of articles and TV clips dealing with North Korea is impressive. It is a real “brand name”. Say the word and images come to mind. Not nice images though, but still.

A longtime observer of Korea, Bruce Cumings, writes in his fascinating book: *North Korea, Another Country* that “Judging from our media, North Korea is the

country every American loves to hate..” (Preface: viii). The media he mentions are what are usually considered quality periodicals in the USA, such as *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *Vanity Fair*, and magazines such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, *The Economist*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. With occasional exceptions all of them, Cumings claims, print “uninformative, unreliable, often sensationalized” articles on North Korea, which deceive rather than educate the public. (xii) Cumings points at the reason why this is sad, frustrating and destructive, with implications for international relations: “Given the mimetic nature of our media, the same stories circulate endlessly; often they are contemporary variations on the same old tales that have been around since North Korea became our enemy sixty years ago..” (xii).

The bleak picture of the North is so massive that no one remains unaffected. People at large, and in governmental ministries, in research councils and foundations, business people and politicians, all receive the same gloomy and scary description of North Korea, making it difficult for anyone to go against the tide. To question what everyone can read, hear and see in any news outlet, is tantamount to side with the bad guys, to support the enemy.

My experience as a North Korea observer is that to publicly question the image that North Korea has attained in the West as a rogue state of the worst possible calibre, necessitates simultaneous statements ensuring the audience that one does not support the North Korean regime, its system, ideology or leaders. And even if one is loudly and clearly stating this, and frequently repeats it, there is often a solid portion of disbelief among the public. The “logic” seems to be: why should he explain away their misbehaviour, or atrocities, if he isn’t siding with them?

Let me try to make my position clear, before I continue with some reflections on alternative ways to approach and understand the topic of today’s lecture. Much of the information circulated about North Korea contains, even if it **is** biased, also reasonably reliable information. There **was** a hunger catastrophe in the 1990s, there **are** labour camps in the North, the human rights situation is **serious**, the regime

allocates huge resources to a **military build-up**, and the people of that country are **deprived access to information** about the outside world. And all these are reasons why we should engage much more with North Korea. What is the alternative?

One can wish the system to disappear, to implode or explode, and very many people do that, but it does not seem to work. In my professional career as a Korea observer I have been told time and again, at least since 1989, that North Korea operates on borrowed time. That the system would not be able to survive the collapse of Soviet Union; the market reforms in China; Kim Il Sung's death; the hunger catastrophe in the 1990s; the stagnant economy; the economic, political and military pressure of the combined US-South Korean forces; the ever intensified UN embargo and other, for the system detrimental forces.

They are still around.

Maybe I should elaborate upon the question why I find it to be of the utmost importance to find a better way to approach North Korea, as it is, and not as we want it to be. There are two main reasons. The first is that the existing approach is ineffective, to the extent that its results are negative, and relations are getting increasingly worse. The second reason is the real serious one: by not changing anything, we are, together with the leadership in Pyongyang, responsible for continuing human suffering in the North.

The present situation in North Korea cannot be reasonably explained by focusing on internal phenomena alone, be it ideology, politics or leadership. The ideology, politics and leadership of North Korea have been created, developed and formed based on internally given traditions and in relation to external influences and pressures. No matter how it appears from the outside, the present reality of North Korea is a socio-political system that forms a very strong structure, because it makes sense to people at large. Insufficient provisions of basic daily necessities to a majority of the population is clearly undermining societal consensus, but the challenge is not detrimental to the system itself.

One external influence with some effects on the socio-political pattern is the communist ideology that came to Korea via Japan, China and the Soviet Union.

However, the early Koreanization of this foreign ideology modified it and made it fit Korean ideas and sentiments.

The external pressure with the strongest influence has been produced through the hostile relations with the USA, Japan and most of the time also with South Korea. The constant pressure from these three powers has to a large extent internally legitimized priorities of the North Korean regime, such as their military build-up, and to some extent even their hardline attitudes towards people perceived to be enemies of the regime.

This is of course not mentioned in order to excuse suppression, but what I would very much like to underline is, that not even North Korea is an either – or case. My task as an academic observer of the Korean peninsula is not to side with one of the two contesting parties. Many of the accusations against North Korea's regime **are** justified by the regime's behaviour and actions, but despite this, or may be because of this, we have an obligation to search for explanations that can shed some light on **why**? We need to contextualize, we need to put cases into broader pictures, to generalize, to search for historical roots and religious-philosophical links, and also for psycho-social explanations, and not to forget, the impact of geo-political economic and power interests.

It is not because such contextualization is absent in the media coverage, the problem is that it is unstated. If it were articulated, we would have been aware of the fact that North Korea usually is described and evaluated as if it was a part of our world, that there is one and only one reality comprising the physical reality: water, trees, stones, people...but also, and in particular how all this is perceived and related to, how it is subjectively and culturally constructed and understood.

I do acknowledge, of course, that a stone is a stone, in Norway, where I was born, as in Korea, the country I have been dealing with for the greater part of my life. What I have observed, however, is that even stones may trigger different ideas and feelings in these two parts of the world. It not only may happen, it happens all the time, and this difference is significant. And it is something we need to be aware of and take into consideration when interacting across cultures.

We don't do that when we look at North Korea. The other countries in East Asia may have distinct cultures, exotic ways worth while studying and experiencing, but even tourists going to North Korea, interviewed about their reasons for doing so, usually say: *to experience the last communist dictatorship*. The basic culture of North Korea, the values and norms of the people living in that country, seem to have vanished. North Korea is the East Germany of East Asia, only worse. The grim political picture prevents us from seeing what may be underneath and behind the surface. As long as this continues to be the case, we are almost as deprived of a real picture of North Korea as the North Koreans are without a real picture of us.

They, however, are not to blame for their blindness, their leadership is. In our case, I put some blame on the media. Few of them seem interested in digging a little deeper than the scary surface. In our part of the world, however, we are in a position to change that perspective. Personally I think that people like me and many present here today have an obligation to share the background information and insights we have reached through years of study to pave the way for another approach, which I will try to do the remaining time of my lecture.

Returning to the new leader in Pyongyang and the blog I quoted from initially, suggesting that "the boy", that is Kim Jong Un, is given a break. Why is it not happening? Why are we waiting for him to continue exactly where his father and before him his grandfather stopped. Disregarding his restraints, his new (to North Korea) style of talking directly to the people, talking about his obligations towards them, walking around with his wife, suddenly providing a new role-model for young North Korean girls? Disregarding all this because: we are waiting for him to "provoke when it suits him"?

Many Korea observers and political commentators in the West continue to focus on his person and an attempt to find indications for his expected bad character, and this focus on him is disseminated to all of us by the media. Nothing much can be revealed, however, by continuing this observation.

A way to find an answer might be, indirectly at least, to turn to what the social sciences tell us about culture and society, culture and cognition, about cross-cultural communication and about the importance of emotions in politics. And from these insights we could evaluate relations between them and us. Let me try to do that.

Based on a growing body of research in the field, we know beyond doubt that cultures differ and culture matters. Different cultures are not alien entities, but rather different ideas and positions on an extended line of continuity. The generalizations, of which a culture consists, relate to a particular pattern that characterizes a majority of the people under study. Even the most internationalized societies maintain crucial aspects of a parochial political culture, and countries not engaged in close international interaction, such as North Korea, will obviously maintain stronger local and traditional traits.

North Korea has developed within more isolated conditions than most other countries, isolated by others and by choice. It has transformed traditional values and norms without altering some of the inherent concepts and understandings relevant to society and politics. While Confucianism as such has been removed from North Korean teaching, textbooks and daily political communication as a stated social and moral ideology, it remains a fundamental basis for contemporary ideology as well as political thinking and action. This development has been possible in North Korea because of its isolation.

People everywhere are raised to understand and relate to society through specific cultures, and the ensuing differences in world outlook must be taken seriously. In some parts of the world, social morality promotes individual freedoms; in others, people are taught to seek conformity. In some areas power is paternalistic and dependency is a positive trait; in others, power needs to be checked and dependency avoided. One can find spots on the globe where social emotions are a central part of what holds society together; in others, emotions are relegated to a space outside of the boundaries of politics. In some regions, collectivistic traits are prevalent; in others, individualism prevails.

Frequently, East Asia and the Western world occupy opposing positions on what could be termed the extended cultural continuity of human affairs. Western cultural

patterns are more or less loosely established and combined, compared to the more strict and well-defined East Asian patterns. The North Korean case belongs to the strict end of the East Asian pattern.

In the case of North Korea, childhood socialization in the family context, formal teaching in educational institutions, and political and ideological propaganda all have a common root, and the one is created to reinforce the other. Together they constitute a resilient world view which can be very difficult to challenge. I have found no better formulation of this phenomenon than the following quotation by Han S. Park:

“Without interruption in the progression of socialization for several decades, Juche has been able to deeply penetrate and assimilate itself into the mass belief system. The degree of rigidity and saliency of beliefs may have reached a point at which external disturbances may not easily cause psychological dissonance.” (*North Korea. The Politics of Unconventional Wisdom* p. 63).

By inventing Juche, the North Korean leadership decided that self-imposed isolation was the best way of preserving national independence. The North Korean people became targets for an intensive ideological socialization process, conditioned to a particular world outlook, to think and act within a certain frame of understanding, cut off from all kinds of input from the surrounding world.

Almost literally, the North Korean population has lived in a cave. They have been prepared to function in this given environment and have developed skills enabling them to do so. The North Korean people have been extremely well prepared to an impossible situation. Today, however, it is not conceivable to maintain such a system. The elite in North Korea is aware that a continued isolation is unsustainable. They are clearly also aware of the fact that they are unable to survive without opening up and connecting to the outside world. In isolation their dream of “a strong and prosperous country” will never come true. A big problem, however, is that the results of an effective socialization and education process stick, and cannot immediately be undone. With reference to the cave analogy: if

you are trained to operate in total darkness, it takes a while before you can appreciate sunshine.

In North Korea, change has been slow, not least due to a fear of external forces. A constructive approach to North Korea must therefore take their fears seriously and acknowledge the worldview they have created as an ideology of survival.

Prolonged animosity between former enemies is well known in many parts of the world, not least in Asia, but the animosity tormenting relations on the Korean peninsula seems to be of a particular thorny kind, as ten years of positive engagement and intensive diplomacy between 1997 and 2007 was not enough to reach a sustainable agreement between the parties concerned. How can this comprehensive deadlock be unlocked?

A sustainable change in North Korea will come from within, as a result of improved relations with the surrounding world. This should be one very good reason to engage with North Korea, despite any of the present disagreements or conflicts. This cannot be expected right away, however, as relations until recently have promoted further antagonism. The following is a classic example, as it demonstrates the deep level of distrust that rules the relationship between the USA and North Korea.

In 2002, U.S., Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, James Kelly, came to Pyongyang to confront the North Koreans about their clandestine nuclear programme. To this the North Korean counterparts said they had something much stronger than nuclear weapons. The US side was convinced that Pyongyang by this meant chemical and biological weapons. It took weeks of intense analysis, and assistance from South Korea, to reveal the meaning of the North Korean statement, which was something like the following: united behind the direction of our leader we constitute a fierce and undefeatable force and as such we will reject any sort of aggression (Pinkston and Saunders, 2003, *Seeing North Korea Clearly*. Survival, Vol.45, No.3, p. 82).

Interpreted within the context of the North Korean political culture, the counterparts' reply became understandable, if not meaningful. But this was only one part of it, the other, a statement from the Foreign Ministry in Pyongyang about

Kelly's visit, further highlights the distance in communication, as well as in position:

“In October 2002, special envoy Kelly, who visited Pyongyang, said that he had intelligence data on the highly enriched uranium program and threatened us by saying that if we did not present it; not only DPRK – US relations but also DPRK – Japan and North – South relations will enter a catastrophic state. We were angered by the US side's extremely overt pressuring act that ignored not only our sovereignty but even the guests' etiquette to the host in the oriental culture. Thus our side clearly stated that we are entitled to possess even more powerful weapons than nuclear weapons to cope with the United States' growing maneuvers to isolate and crush us and we did not even feel the need to bother to explain to the US side, the most hostile country, what they [the weapons] are” ('US Hostile Policy Disrupting 6-Way Talks', issued 8 October 2004 by the Korean Central Broadcasting Station: Compiled and distributed by NTIS, US Dept. of Commerce/World News).

In this climate, talks have been conducted – on and off – since 2003. In the 2007 'breakthrough' of the so-called six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear programme, the latest success-turning-failure of these negotiations which actually were started to mend the relations between the USA and North Korea, the official document signed by all parties stressed the need to develop mutual trust.

Trust is obviously needed, but to reach it, also a different approach and another focus are required. Besides the political culture approach, a novel approach in political science may contribute new insight and a better understanding to this complicated field of study. In one word, emotions have to be included.

To pay due attention to the importance of culture, understood as a set of basic values and norms, for politics, internal and international, it is necessary to take into account the empirically proved fact that cultural change is an extremely slow process. Further, to suggest that emotions are something to take into consideration

when observing international politics is to realize that hostility and hatred, as well as cooperation and friendship, impact decisions and actions by political leaders and their institutions. This insight is not new, as already Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), the philosopher, wrote:

“no nation at war with another shall permit such acts of war as shall make mutual trust impossible during some future time of peace.... Some level of trust in the enemy’s way of thinking must be preserved even in the midst of war, for otherwise no peace can ever be concluded and the hostilities would become a war of extermination.”

“Some level of trust in the enemy’s level of thinking” is necessary, writes Kant. To me it seems to be a reasonable suggestion, and it seems equally clear that none of the fighting parties took this dictum into consideration. Not during the war, and not later. The damage has been done, no doubt about that. How then to move forward?

Up until now, according to our Western approach, politics should be based on reason, and judgments in politics based on something besides reason counted less, if at all. And if international relations were to be considered normal, they had to be governed by logical, rational calculations while emotions were seen as irrational interferences that ideally should be avoided.

Increasing transnational communication at all levels suggests, however, that the rational actor idea is inadequate, and this assumption is backed by research in cross-cultural psychology, political psychology and in neuroscience. In this last mentioned field it has been found that emotions exert an important impact on decision-making, because emotional processes take place as an integral part of rational cognitive processing. In other words, to differentiate between reason and emotions means to artificially divide something that should be seen and understood as one single complex phenomenon.

If one perceives leaders – both in North Korea and in other countries – as what they are, namely cognitive actors, this implies that they are human beings who

perceive the world from different positions informed by the socio-cultural and psychological traits particular to the social groups to which they belong. This does not mean the abandonment of rationality altogether, but it includes the individual as actor in political relations. This cognitive approach implies the assumption that people differ in how they view the world and their role in it, as well as the understanding that these patterns of behaviour are detectable and understandable. In other words, this is a dismissal of the intellectual tradition that has sought to eliminate mental phenomena from explanations of social behaviour and societal actions.

This can actually help us to understand and make sense of cross-cultural social and interpersonal relations. The cognitive attribution theory has been developed within social psychology as a theory concerned with how people explain their own and others' behaviour. A particularly relevant aspect of this theory is the fundamental attribution error, which finds expression in a general tendency to explain our own behaviour as a response to the given situation: I had to do what I did because of certain external circumstances. This behaviour is then perceived as situational – and thus rational.

When judging others, however, there is a tendency to see their behaviour as dispositional. Their actions are due to an internal disposition; they may be aggressive, insensitive to others, or evil – and thus irrational. When reinforced by a widespread general inclination to see oneself and one's friends in a positive light and those we dislike in a negative light, the fundamental attribution error may explain the resilience of enemy images long after the conflicting relationship has ended. It would be strange if the tense and complicated relationship between North Korea and the outside world was completely unaffected by the consequences of attribution errors.

If one then consults cross-cultural psychology, it is relatively easy to locate studies focusing on similarities and differences in social attribution across cultures. Such studies indicate that people in East Asia view personality as more flexible, while people in the West operate with personality traits as something quite fixed (*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 2002).

This difference is anything but trivial and it probably has serious political implications. The problem is that when personality traits are seen as fixed, as we in the West tend to do, it implies that the situation will not improve. The evil state will not moderate its behaviour, the bad leader will not be reasonable. A leader who is considered evil is not expected to change and therefore, if he is evil enough, there is a good reason to get rid of him, by violent means if necessary. From North Korea's perspective there is a frightening example in what happened between the USA and Iraq, and leaders in the North explain their 'military first' doctrine and nuclear ambitions by pointing exactly at this (Personal communication, Pyongyang 2010).

But what if – as now indicated – there are culturally based divergences in how we understand and relate to, for instance, evil? A fascinating study by political scientist, C. Fred Alford, published in 1999, investigates the notion of evil in Korea. His findings suggest that not only is there a difference in our perceptions of whether personal character is seen as fixed or flexible, but there is also a basic difference in how we understand evil. In Alford's words, "...when everything one knows about evil, and everything else, is learned and practiced in the family, and relationships modeled on the family, how can one ever call something, or someone, evil?" Therefore, to operate with evil as a characteristic of a person is close to impossible, in a society where all social relations are seen in terms of an extended family, even to the extent that strangers are called by terms that refer to family members.

Is this something which has implications for relations with North Korea?

According to Alford it has indeed. His study was carried out in the late 1990's, before the nuclear issue exploded on the Korean peninsula. He nevertheless included this issue as one of his hypothetical questions, phrased as follows: "Would it be evil if North Korea had nuclear weapons?" Almost all his respondents said: no, and about half of them said that North Korea would never use nuclear weapons against the South. Some elaborated by saying that "If the North Koreans had nuclear weapons, they would be ours too."

These statements were recorded when the mood in South Korea was more open to the North, during the Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy period, than it is today. The last five years, with a conservative government in Seoul maintaining a hardline approach to the North, may somewhat have altered such accommodating attitudes. It is quite interesting though to observe that the fear of North Korea in the South, the closest neighbour, may be less acute than it is in the USA, thousands of miles away. Could the differences in perception, or judgements, be explained, at least partly, by the fundamental attribution error?

I think so. The USA and the Western powers in general, have for years been engaged in making North Korea to give up its nuclear ambitions, while the same powers more or less accept that India and Pakistan, and Israel, have acquired such dreadful weapons in defiance of international agreements. The reason for the continued focus on North Korea's nuclear programme would then be: because they are evil and will remain so. There seems to be an important difference between the East Asian and the Western attitudes towards what both sides regard as a problematic Other.

Because we know that emotions have different expressions in different cultural settings and that cultural distance affects our ability to interpret others' emotions, it seems imperative to introduce a cultural filter in cross-cultural international political communication.

In her illuminating article, 'The Passion of World Politics', Neta Crawford writes: "If one group consistently views another as hostile rather than fearful – and this perception is reinforced by that group's tendency to issue bellicose statements when it feels threatened – spirals of misconceptions seem more likely." Her case might well describe the relations between USA and North Korea.

Crawford further writes that while expressions of empathy may lead to greater flexibility in negotiations, then dehumanization, demonization and enmity may have the opposite consequences. In other words: what we all experience in our daily life matters in international politics as well.

Having said all this, is there any evidence, based on practical experience, telling us that a more culture-sensitive approach to North Korea, acknowledging their particular ways and norms, might generate better results? By this I mean: better relations, a growing level of trust, more openness from their side adding to better and more peaceful relations on the Korean peninsula and in North East Asia?

The simple answer is yes. Having been around for so many years and followed ups and downs in the relations between North Korea and the outside world, I have seen that hostility has been met with hostility, often wrapped in very strong rhetoric, pressure from abroad has been met with serious counter-pressure, while an accommodating approach from abroad has been welcomed and positively received. A question is whether Pyongyang has many other options?

The American scholar, Leon Sigal, has termed the relations between Pyongyang and Washington tit-for-tat, and it is a very good description. The problem is that it is difficult for Washington to accept Pyongyang as an equal. But when they do, as when Madeleine Albright visited Kim Jong Il in 2000, as of course Kim Dae-jung's visit the same year, it opens possibilities for real changes in the relations.

Both the then South Korean President and the then US Secretary of State revealed positive impressions after their meetings with the former North Korean leader. During a long conversation with Kim Dae-jung in Seoul, after his term had ended, he told me about his visit to Pyongyang. This was the first ever summit between the two Korean leaders, and it took place, as he explained it, *on the other's side*.

We did not exactly know what to expect, he said, so we were a little nervous, leaving the plane to set foot on North Korean soil. Then we saw the North Korean leader on his way to greet us, and when we met, Kim Jong Il bowed deeper than me. The former South Korean president then stressed: this was not due to our different positions, but, because I was older than him. Then I knew we had something in common, and then I knew that we could talk, Kim Dae-jung remembered.

On the way from the airport to the government guesthouse, the two leaders sat beside each other in the same limousine – another one followed behind empty, and

they were holding hands and talking, knowing that this could be the beginning of an era of great changes. Changes took place, but not to the extent expected.

In her book *Madam Secretary*, published in 2003, Madeleine Albright reserves a whole chapter for her visit to Pyongyang (pp. 477-494. Danish edition). It goes without saying that she is not in favour of the North Korean regime, but from what she tells from the meetings with Kim Jong Il he is seriously interested in improving relations with the USA, and she believes that this would be possible. Her own negotiations were quite fruitful, and in her book she mentions the North Korean leader as being well-informed, open and flexible, not afraid of admitting his and his country's problems and weaknesses.

Albright also reveals that Kim Dae-jung did whatever he could to make the US President Bill Clinton visit Pyongyang, as Kim D.J. was convinced that time was ripe for such a summit. Clinton's administration was ready, including the President himself, but the reason stated why such a meeting never materialized was the ongoing chaos in the Middle East. Albright also reveals, however, that several members of Congress as well as opinion makers were against a summit with Pyongyang, as they feared that a deal with North Korea would weaken the arguments for a national missile defence system (Albright p. 492).

Where does all this bring us? One thing is for sure: a new user's manual to North Korea must be much more aware of the **we**, the **us**, in relation to them. It is a relationship, and whether relations develop in a positive or negative direction depends on both, or all, the parties concerned.

The question might be, does "the world" want North Korea to come out? President Kim Dae-jung of South Korea, with support from President Clinton and his Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, made up a triangle with a serious urge to end the last unrelenting cold war conflict. But this policy later changed.

In 2001, when Clinton's term had ended, Kim Dae-jung hurried to Washington, to meet with President Bush to secure continued US support for his engagement policy with North Korea. This support was not given. Instead the new Bush

administration adopted what was popularly called the ABC strategy to North Korea, ABC meaning Anything But Clinton.

In this era of Globalization, define it as you like, no big company ventures into other parts of the world without consulting experts on culture, cultural differences and cross-cultural communication. The risks involved are simply too big, a failure too expensive.

Foreign ministries are less prone to engage with such kind of experts, although the risks involved in this field are much bigger and failures often have deadly consequences.

In 2000, North Korea was ready to come out, the remaining disagreements were manageable according to top leaders in South Korea and in the USA. In Pyongyang expectations were high as well. This situation, the closest to a real breakthrough ever (my guess), became possible because of good will on all sides.

Now, 12 years later, we can hope that the upcoming presidential elections in South Korea and in the USA will enable the new leaders to give the young man in Pyongyang a break, so they together can secure peace on the Korean Peninsula.