

## RECALLING KOREA PAST: A DIPLOMAT'S VIEW OF THE 1970s\*

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I was fortunate to have, between 1975 and 2008, three diplomatic postings to the British Embassy, Seoul, totalling 13 years. I was accompanied on all three by my wife Pam. What made this experience especially interesting was that each posting coincided with a different phase in South Korea's remarkable economic, social and political development.

The first posting, in the 1970s, I shall discuss in some detail in a moment. The second, from mid-1988 to late 1991, was noteworthy for the door-opening Seoul Olympics, related infrastructure developments, moves under President Roh Tae Woo (No Taeu) towards full democracy, and the recognition of South Korea as a major economic power. It also coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first formal links between South Korea and the communist world, and in 1991 the two Koreas' UN membership. My first visit to the DPRK took place in May 1991, on the occasion of the Inter-Parliamentary Union Conference in Pyongyang, prior to Britain establishing diplomatic relations with the North.

My third posting, as Britain's Ambassador, was from late 2003 to early 2008. It covered most of the late President Noh Moo Hyun (Roh Moohyun)'s presidency – including his continuation of the Sunshine Policy towards the DPRK – as well as the election of his successor Lee Myung Bak. By then South Korea was truly democratic, the 12th largest economy in the world, and making a diverse and very significant contribution to world affairs. Domestically it was experiencing fast-changing societal attitudes and growing multi-culturalism, and externally a tremendous surge in its links with China. I made a second visit to the DPRK in 2004, by which time Britain had an embassy in Pyongyang. But it's the first posting in Seoul, from 1975 to 1979, that I've been invited to talk about today; not so much about my work at our Embassy, but more to provide a flavour of what we found in Korea, and of our life there.

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In mid-1974 we were approaching the end of a busy first posting overseas at our large Embassy in cosmopolitan Paris. Highlights had included a State Visit by HM The Queen, the Vietnam Peace Conference and Britain's entry into the Common Market. A letter arrived informing me that my next assignment would be back to London to learn Turkish. So be it, I thought, as I purchased *Teach Yourself Turkish*. One week later – no email or even fax in those days – came a second letter with different instructions: because of growing interest in Korea, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO, our Foreign Ministry) had decided it was time to start a Korean language training programme, and I was to be the guinea pig. This was to involve two years in Seoul on fulltime Korean language training, followed by a three-year posting in our Embassy's Political Section. (As a footnote I'm pleased to say the FCO has maintained this language training programme ever since. So I must have done something right!)

Barely had Pam and I found Korea on the map, than we were shocked to find ourselves watching live on television an assassination attempt on South Korea's President Park at Seoul's National Theater in October 1974, which tragically killed the popular First Lady. Their elder daughter, who at a young age then bravely assumed the duties of the First Lady, is today a Presidential candidate.

Having left behind anxious parents, we arrived at our then small Embassy in far-off Seoul on a freezing day in January 1975. Korea seemed, in those first few days, a bleak place compared to Paris or London, and at around minus 20 degrees centigrade felt bone-numbingly cold, the more so after our stopover in balmy Hong Kong. The shops contained no imported foodstuffs, and wine and cheese – practically our diet in France! – were almost impossible to find. We were also struck by how mono-cultural, inward-looking and conformist Koreans seemed to be, in opinions, dress and general outlook. The appearance of many military around the country and the fact that all schoolchildren wore black, brass-buttoned uniforms, with short-cropped hair, added to this feeling.

And, though it's hard to believe it now, per capita income was just US\$ 600 per annum in 1975 – similar to India or Vietnam today. It's now around \$ 20,000. But in 1975 of course the South's economy had only recently overtaken that of the North, which had always benefited from a large proportion of the peninsula's industry, minerals and energy resources. A remarkable economic turn-around in the South was just getting under way.

It was a tough environment for most Koreans, but the combination of ex-Generals dispensing military-style discipline, some very able US-trained economic planners, a tremendous work ethic and a strong sense of nationalism was starting to produce impressive results. Take, for example, Ulsan, a small fishing village down south. This was being turned into a massive shipyard, soon to be building the biggest tankers in the world. Nearby, Hyundai's first car plant was also under way. Both of these

major industrial projects benefited from British know-how and equipment. Chung Seyung of Hyundai Motors had enlisted George Turnbull, a past Managing Director of British Leyland, to help. (It was said that he took a UK-built Morris Marina to Korea to demonstrate how NOT to build a car!). I recall him once taking a break in our Embassy bar and saying, on a bad day: 'These Koreans will never build a car!' Nonetheless, the Hyundai Pony rolled off the Ulsan production line in 1977, and the rest is history. Meanwhile at Pohang Korea's first two steel mills (under the guidance of General Park Taejoon) were going up, with Davy McKee blast furnaces supplied from Britain.

The newly completed Seoul–Pusan highway, which had opened up the country top to bottom, was paving the way for the construction of a whole slew of further highways. Samsung's domestic and white goods, Lucky Gold Star kitchen appliances, as well as stainless steel cutlery, tyres and other items were starting to hit foreign shores. Lotte had branched out from chewing gum into a wide range of confectionery, as well as moving into Department stores. That said, the British Government was still providing aid in the form of technical assistance to Korea as late as the mid-1970s. We knew the British couple running an agricultural extension project in Suwŏn, then deep in the countryside, near where the Seoul Club had its country branch, and another British expert who was helping to improve Korea's stilted, state-controlled television programmes. Today of course South Korea itself has become an impressive aid donor.

Politically, the South Korea that greeted us was swathed in a palpably tense atmosphere. President Park Chung Hee, in charge since the coup of 1961, cut a rather sad figure after the tragic death of his wife and was said to lead a frugal existence. Pictures of his activities appeared daily in every newspaper, which like the TV and radio stations were very much influenced by the authorities. In what was pretty much a military dictatorship there was scant regard for many of the civil rights which we from a Western democracy took for granted, and any signs of domestic dissent were quickly quashed. There were no real trade unions, and the economy was largely 'planned' by the Government, who worked in close collaboration with half a dozen big companies (*chaebŏl*). There was no meaningful Parliamentary opposition, and no NGOs. As well as a strictly enforced nightly curfew, with jittery young conscripts at check points throughout Seoul, there were monthly air raid drills which had to be taken seriously. There were even campaigns from time to time against inappropriate dress and long hair, with enforced haircuts for young men. At Yonsei University, where I studied Korean for 18 months, tear gas often wafted across the campus as riot police clashed with students wanting change, often in front of waiting TV cameras. Creators of 'unrest' and critical writers were branded as sympathisers of North Korea or of communism and dealt with accordingly. There were many political prisoners

and in our Embassy we dealt with much correspondence from Amnesty International and from concerned individuals about human rights issues.

That said, the North Korean regime under Kim Il Sung was in hostile mood and there was a definite feeling that its forces could well attack or invade again. Land and sea border incidents were frequent, some putting the country onto red alert. I especially recall the tree-cutting affair in the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) at Panmunjŏm in August 1976 when several US soldiers were hacked to death. Jostling and fights took place at Panmunjŏm itself – I knew a US colonel whose throat was stamped on by North Korean guards – and patrol boats were occasionally sunk in skirmishes at sea. Several times foreigners left for the safety of Hong Kong. Ever vigilant anti-aircraft batteries surrounded Seoul, and the hills behind the Blue House and the nearby roads were out of bounds. The military were highly visible. There were regular incursions by North Korean mini-submarines to put agents ashore in remote spots, and two extraordinary tunnels dug at huge cost by the North under the DMZ for use as invasion routes were discovered during our time.

Another thing to recall was that the South Korean Government allowed no contact with communist, or even socialist countries. This meant, among other things, a complete absence of Embassies or citizens in Korea from the countries concerned. So incidents like the forcing down by Soviet jets of a Korean Air airliner in Murmansk in 1978 was not only dreadful in itself, but also very awkward to handle diplomatically.

With all unauthorised contact with North Korea banned I kept under lock and key my modest North Korean stamp collection, as well as the highly abusive North Korean propaganda leaflets dropped by balloon that I'd find on weekend hikes in the hills around Seoul!

As for South Korea's diplomatic effort generally, that was aimed mostly on competing with North Korea around the globe. This was not simply for propaganda purposes, but in order to win over the governments of other countries, however tiny, because each had a vote at the UN.

Apart from occasional Red Cross talks, and periodic meetings of the Military Armistice Committee, on which our Embassy's Defence Attaché sat, there was at that time no constructive engagement between the two Koreas. Because of that I especially relished contact with the four members of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC), especially the Czechs and Poles. Based in the DMZ, they were unique in that they had access to both Koreas. Today only the Swedes and Swiss remain. As a legacy of Britain's important role in the Korean War a platoon of British soldiers, on rotation from Hong Kong, still formed part of the UN Honour Guard stationed in Seoul's Yongsan base. Thanks to their British Forces Post Office and access to NAAFI facilities in Hong Kong, we in the Embassy were sometimes able to obtain much appreciated supplies of food from Britain. (The detachment was withdrawn in the early 1980s.)

Not surprisingly, I soon realised that contrary to first impressions, this was a highly stimulating, challenging and exciting environment for a young Embassy political officer. Not only was I involved in helping to strengthen bilateral links, but part of my job was to find out what was *really* going on in South Korean government and non-government circles, and notwithstanding the attentions of the KCIA, behind the scenes too. Additionally, since Britain then had no diplomatic relations with North Korea, the job included trying to find out what one could within South Korea about the developments in the North, though, frankly, I can't say this was terribly productive.

Whether a continuation of democracy in South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s would have achieved more for the Korean people, no one can say. Personally I rather doubt it, given the dreadful state in which the South found itself as a result of the Korean War, and the difficulties the immediate post-War government got into. And one should not forget that the South had been a poor relation of the North economically. I think it is now widely recognised that had it not been for the powerful leadership and vision provided by President Park and those around him, coupled with the seemingly tireless endeavours of a very determined people, and some foreign assistance, the development of Korea's economy and the social changes that that brought would have been far, far slower. By the mid-1970s it was clear that a springboard had been built, albeit at the cost of certain civil liberties, which would deliver unprecedentedly rapid industrialisation and economic growth, and significant improvements in most people's living standards. A lengthy period of 10% growth per annum was just beginning, and unlike in some developing countries today, there really was visible trickle-down effect.

However, Koreans with early wealth had to be careful not to flaunt it; for example scrutiny by the authorities of cars at (the few) golf clubs and (more numerous) 'love hotels' was commonplace. (This did not prevent the official entertainment of visiting VIPs taking place at *kisaeng* houses, where most evenings ended with everyone in turn having to sing and sometimes dance with the female staff. I can hazily recall some visiting British Ministers and MPs more keen on this than others.)

As for our own daily life, we lived in a quiet street in Sodaemun-gu in central Seoul in a red-brick house built by the oil company ESSO in the 1930s. I grew vegetables in the garden. Next door was a little shop selling guttering, watering cans and other aluminium goods made from scrap. Sewage, used on crops in the fields, was collected weekly by the 'honey wagon' from the many traditional houses around us. I took a bus to Yonsei, and could walk to the Embassy. My wife, like me, enjoyed exploring on foot the older parts of Seoul, which still had a number of thatched buildings even near City Hall. Among other activities, she recorded English soundtracks for cultural films produced by Korea's Overseas Information Service (KOIS), and gave English conversation lessons at home to a number of foreign and Korean ladies, including

for a while the President's younger daughter. It was bliss having so little traffic, even if many roads outside Seoul, e.g. on Kangwha-do and Cheju-do, were still rough. Most of the vehicles when we arrived were either very old, or imported from Japan, but bizarrely there were many British Ford Cortinas in evidence, assembled locally from kits. Of course no self-respecting private Korean citizen drove himself. It was all chauffeurs (male) in white gloves. Our own imported blue Ford Escort was the same colour as most taxis, so we were often flagged down, especially by drunks near curfew time, even when my heavily pregnant wife was at the wheel ... without the white gloves, of course.

Apart from the US military, there were few foreigners in the country, and all were seen initially as *migug-saram* (Americans). 'Ah, English gentlemen!' was the happy reaction when we revealed our origins. There were no imported food items in the shops, though I believe goods could be 'ordered' from US bases through the black market. I remember once spotting in a small shop (*kumong kargei*) a packet of British Polo mints and rushing in to buy it at an absurdly high price! There was no British School or British Chamber of Commerce, and only a couple of decent hotels in Seoul, notably the Chosun. The newly-arrived British Council Representative occupied just one room in the Embassy. Smart houses were starting to be built in Sungbuk-dong but there was little significant construction south of the Han River, where the new National Assembly building stood in splendid near-isolation by Yoido Plaza. Immediately south of the river we would skate in the winter, on frozen rice field flooded by enterprising farmers. Skates were cheaply hired, loud music was played and a kettle of welcome rice wine was always on the boil. A great way to keep warm, even though one's knees were cut to pieces by frozen stubble! Along the filthy banks of the river – where the Olympic highway was later built – was much slum housing, often swept away in the rainy season. And there were only three river bridges, including Banpo and Hannam, compared with about 23 when we returned finally in 2003.

It was always fun exploring the countryside in those days. Despite the paucity of decent roads I recall our driving ourselves to Sörak, and Kyöngpodae on the East coast, where most of the beaches, mined and heavily guarded, were inaccessible. We spent two pleasant short breaks in a house at Taejön Beach, a site where foreign missionaries had been allowed to establish holiday homes, complete with bakery and refectory. We also drove down to Kyöngju, where the famed Royal tombs were yet to be opened, and flew to Cheju island where we were the only foreigners – and only non-honeymooners – at the Honeymoon House Hotel in Sögwip'o. (No Koreans held passports then; they were issued for special authorised trips so THE place to honeymoon was Cheju.) An ancient bus took us round the island on mainly unmade roads.

It is worth recalling that in the mid-1970s, South Korea's farming and fishing

sector was hugely important, the source of employment for 45% of the population compared to about 6% now. On trips with the Royal Asiatic Society or driving round rural areas to assess local conditions or the state of the all-important rice harvest, we would see many thatched houses and ploughs pulled by oxen. Rice-planting was done by hand and farm workers struggled under heavily loaded A-frames. Traditional dress, for men and women, was commonplace in rural areas and in towns on festive occasions. Conditions in the countryside, still pretty poor in the mid-1970s, began to improve however as the *Saemaul Undong* (New Village Movement), a far-sighted campaign to improve rural and village life, got under way. Widespread reforestation was going ahead too following the devastation of the War. There were some beggars in the cities, mostly women, old or with babies, but on the whole the less well-off did not complain, rather they scrimped and saved and did anything to increase their income and improve their prospects.

All in all, these five years turned out to be hugely exciting and memorable ones for us, with a host of new experiences, masses to learn and a fascinating culture to explore. Several friendships we made during that time with Koreans have lasted to this very day. I count of special worth my involvement every Saturday evening with a group of enthusiastic Korean university students who would meet at our Embassy, at some risk to themselves, to practise their English. One arranged for me to live with her family for two months to immerse myself in the language; another who left for the US is now running for a Congressional seat there; others went on to senior posts in the private sector or government, and at least three went on to be South Korean Ambassadors. I am still in touch with several of them, more than 35 years later.

It was a special posting for us in another way too, because our first two children were born, in a Korean hospital, the Cheil, in Seoul in 1976 and 1978. Our firstborn, a boy, in the Year of the Dragon, naturally got us bonus points in the eyes of our Korean friends!

But all good things come to an end. By the autumn of 1979 my successor had duly completed his own Korean language training and was ready to take my place in the British Embassy. Our departure date had arrived. With mixed emotions, and accompanied now by two small children 'Made in Korea', we flew out of Kimp'o airport on the morning of 26 October 1979 to spend a few days relaxing in Malaysia before getting back to Britain.

The following morning, however, brought shocking news. No sooner had we sat down to breakfast than the hotel receptionist rushed over: 'Your President has been shot!' he cried. Out of the blue, President Park had indeed been shot, and killed – not by a North Korean assassin but by his own security chief – just a few hours after we had said farewell to Seoul. Tanks were on the streets amid shock and confusion. I instinctively felt I should go back to Seoul at once, but as Pam rightly pointed out I had left; my successor was now in the hot seat!

As things turned out, therefore, this was not just for us the end of a fascinating five-year assignment; for South Korea and its people it was the sudden end of a long and hugely important era in their country's development. With hindsight, I count myself privileged to have witnessed at first hand something of that era during those last five years of President Park Chung Hee's remarkable 18 years in office. Not only did the experience provide an invaluable backdrop and point of reference for my two further postings to Seoul, but also for much that has happened, and continues to happen, on the peninsula as a whole to this very day.