



Challenges are Opportunities for Korea and the World*

Garry Jacobs

Chief Executive Officer, World Academy of Art & Science;
Vice President, The Mother's Service Society, India

This is a time of unprecedented speed, interconnectedness, complexity and uncertainty which pose serious challenges to global peace, security, and sustainable social progress. Prevailing political, economic and social theory, institutions and policies are outdated and unable to cope with the need for change. But this is also a time of unprecedented opportunity for rapid social evolution at the national and global level, akin to the opportunities that led to the sudden fall of the Berlin Wall, democratization of Eastern Europe, reunification of Germany and founding of the European Union. Changes of this magnitude only occur when the aspirations and energies of the population are awakened, released and channeled into constructive action by idealistic leadership as they were during democratic movements which ended colonialism after WWII and spread through Central and Eastern Europe in 1989. South Korea's peaceful Candlelight Movement which began last year is of that character.

Today Korea represents a nexus of the world's challenges and opportunities. Decades of phenomenal political, economic and social progress in the South have prepared it to assume a greater role in international affairs. At the same time, the legacy of unresolved issues on the Korean Peninsula threatens its remarkable achievements and casts a shadow over its future. Korea must at once preserve its hard earned gains while overcoming a seemingly intractable nuclear dilemma that even the superpowers have been powerless to resolve. This cannot be achieved by the conventional policies of either confrontation or appeasement. It requires a different strategy at a different level.

History provides insights into an ultimate solution to the Korean problem. After asserting its freedom from Britain in 1776, it took America nearly a century to translate into practice the ideals enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. The American Civil War abolished slavery. It also united a loose confederation of states into a strong federal system. In the decades following the end of that war, the energies of the American people were released as never before and the nation quickly rose from obscurity to become the leading economy in the world and a promised land for people of all nations aspiring for freedom and prosperity. The translation of idealistic democratic principles into practical realities was the lever for unleashing the prodigious energies and creativity of the American people for national development and eventual world leadership.

The unity America achieved through a bloody civil war, Germany accomplished more recently by peaceful means. Divided into East and West for nearly five decades, West

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Germany was sandwiched between two nuclear armed superpowers and helpless to act to restore its own unity. Rather than embracing aggressive hostility toward its brethren in the East, West Germany adopted two very significant strategies. Domestically, it sought to transform an authoritarian state into one of the most vibrant and inclusive democracies in the world, reconciling the tensions between capitalists and workers and fostering tolerance and cultural harmony among an increasingly heterogeneous population. At the same time, internationally, it became a leading proponent of European unification and subordinated nationalistic ambitions to foster unprecedented levels of cooperation and integration with its neighbors. West Germany began its gradual rise as an exemplary world citizen and leader.

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These examples offer insights relevant to Korea today. At the national level the gains of democratization achieved by the Candlelight Movement in South Korea should now be translated more broadly and deeply into greater individual freedom, equality of opportunity, transparency and public participation. This will require profound changes in the institutions and culture that still foster obedience to authority and various forms of social discrimination. It can only be achieved by a broad-based movement of civil society inspired by the patriotic spirit of the Candlelight Movement and transformed into concrete policies and a program of action at the national level.

Participative democracy can provide the political basis for the movement, but it needs to be supported by a sea change in social institutions to embody new values, attitudes and perspectives. Today Korea is a global leader in educational attainments. Its students rank among the world’s highest on international standardized tests. Yet, rote memorization, conventional conformity and submission to authority prevail in the Korean educational system in this transitional age in which independent thinking, innovation, creativity and fresh initiative are urgently needed. A new paradigm in education is essential to shift the focus from mass production of standardized citizens to fully develop the minds and personalities of youth to think and act independently and creatively to refashion society according to a new vision and values.

At the global level, Korea has a unique opportunity to leverage its achievements and public visibility to provide a voice, model and leadership for the collective advancement of humanity as a whole. The nuclear threat which it faces today is the consequence of the failed policies of the five original nuclear powers, which have refused to meet their commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and missed the opportunity to eradicate this great menace to humanity at the end of the Cold War. Their entrenched position must be radically altered to prevent a further escalation and proliferation of similar threats. Korea has an

opportunity to become a strong courageous voice of humanity calling for the total abolition of nuclear weapons, which is the only viable solution to the problem it faces and the danger of further nuclear proliferation in other regions.

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At the same time Korea is well positioned to seize the initiative to become a leader of the global movement to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Already a model of rapid development at the national level, Korea can become a voice and leader in the quest for universal human development at the global level.

The word ‘peace’ in English and Western thought is practically conceived in negative terms as the absence of war and conflict. But in more ancient Asian societies peace is conceived in positive terms as *shanti*—as a spiritual status that fulfills all the conditions that promote sustainable and harmonious human security, freedom, unity, welfare, and well-being.

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Author contact information

Email: garryj29@gmail.com