

Korea's remarkable journey

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WARWICK MORRIS is Executive Chairman of the Anglo-Korean Society in the UK. Previously a diplomat for nearly 40 years, he served three times for a total of 13 years at the British Embassy in Seoul, most recently as Ambassador from 2003 to 2008. He made working visits to North Korea in 1991 and 2004.

Between 1975 and 2008 I was fortunate to have three diplomatic postings to the British Embassy, Seoul, including Korean language study at Seoul's Yonsei University from 1975-76. What made the whole experience so fascinating was that each posting coincided with a distinctly different phase in South Korea's remarkable economic, political and social development. What is more, as I write this we are celebrating the State Visit to the UK of the Republic of Korea's first woman President, HE Park Geun-hye, who throughout my posting in the 1970s carried out the role, at a young age and with great dignity, of First Lady to her father President Park Chung-hee, whose wife had tragically lost her life in 1974. President Park Geun-hye's journey, like that of her country, is a remarkable one.

When my wife and I arrived at our then small Embassy in Seoul on a freezing day in January 1975, South Korea seemed rather bleak after London and Paris. The shops contained virtually no imported goods, much of society appeared inward-looking, mono-cultural, chauvinistic and conformist. The military were much in evidence, along with nightly curfews, because of the very real threat of attack from North Korea. And though hard

to believe now, per capita income was just US\$600 per annum in 1975 – not dissimilar to that of India or Vietnam today. But in 1975 the South's economy had only recently overtaken that of the North, which had always benefited from the lion's share of the peninsula's industry, minerals and hydropower.

It soon became apparent that a remarkable economic turn-around was getting under way in the South. This was no 'miracle on the Han river' as some describe it, but the result of tough, visionary leadership, some very able young economic planners, a tremendous inborn work ethic and a powerful sense of nationalism. Take, for example, Ulsan, a small fishing village down south. In the mid 1970s this was being turned into a massive shipyard, soon to build the biggest tankers in the world. Nearby, Hyundai's first car plant was under way. Both projects, I am glad to say, benefited from British know-how and equipment. Once the first Hyundai Pony rolled off the Ulsan production line in 1977, that spelled the end of Ford Cortinas built from kits, old Japanese cars and US jeeps. Meanwhile, at Pohang, South Korea's first two steel mills were going up fast, with Davy McKee blast furnaces supplied from Britain.

The newly completed Seoul-Busan highway which



The Hyundai car production line in Ulsan

had opened up the country from top to bottom, was paving the way for further highways. Samsung's domestic and white goods, Lucky Gold Star kitchen appliances, as well as stainless steel cutlery, cheap clothing and shoes, tyres and other basic items were starting to hit foreign shores. Lotte had branched out from chewing gum and confectionary to Department stores. That said, the British Government was still providing aid in the form of technical assistance to Korea in the mid 1970s.

Meanwhile, the North Korean regime then under Kim Il-Sung, concerned by the dynamic growth in the South, was in hostile mood; there was a definite sense that its forces might invade again. Serious land and sea incidents were frequent. At this time the South Korean Government allowed its citizens no unauthorised contact with communist, or even socialist, countries. This meant, among other things, a complete absence of Embassies in South Korea from the countries concerned.

As for South Korea's diplomatic effort, that was aimed mostly at competing with North Korea around the globe, not simply for propaganda purposes but in order to win over countries with a vote at the UN.

As a legacy of Britain's significant 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 the Yongsan military base in central Seoul.

I soon realised that, contrary to first impressions, this was a stimulating and exciting environment for a young Embassy officer tasked with helping to strengthen bilateral links, monitor political developments and build

contacts with politicians and officials. And since Britain then had no diplomatic relations with North Korea, the job also included trying to monitor, not without difficulty, developments in the North from the South.

By the late 1970s it was clear that a springboard was in place, at some cost to civil liberties, which would soon deliver unprecedentedly rapid industrialisation, economic growth and major improvements in living standards. A lengthy period of 10 per cent growth per annum was just beginning and, unlike in some developing countries today, there was visible trickle-down effect.

In 1970s Seoul there was no British School or British Chamber of Commerce, and only a couple of decent hotels. The newly arrived British Council representative occupied just one room in the Embassy. Smart houses were being built in Sungbuk-dong but there was little 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 winter on frozen rice fields flooded by enterprising farmers, while along the banks of the Han river – where the Olympic Expressway would be built – there was still slum housing, badly hit in the rainy season. Crossing the Han river were just three bridges, compared with two dozen or more today.

It was fun exploring the countryside in those days, often on rough roads in places where few people spoke English. Most beaches, except on Jeju Island, the prime honeymoon centre, were off-limits. It is worth recalling that in the mid 1970s South Korea's farming and fishing

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The cauldron at the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul

The contrast between the two Koreas today, and what they have – or have not – achieved over the past 40 years, could hardly be more stark

sector was hugely important, the source of employment for 45 per cent of the population, compared to about 5 per cent now. On trips with the Royal Asiatic Society, or driving round rural areas to assess the state of the all-important rice harvest, we would often see thatched houses and ploughs pulled by oxen. Traditional dress, for men and women, was commonplace there, and in towns on festive occasions. Rural conditions lagged behind but improved significantly as the Saemaul Undong (New Village Movement), a far-sighted government campaign to improve village life, took root. Widespread reforestation was also a priority following the devastation of the Korean War.

All in all, those five years were hugely exciting and memorable ones for us. Many friendships made with Koreans then have lasted to this day. I especially valued my involvement every Saturday with a group of enthusiastic university students who would meet at our Embassy to practice their English. One arranged for me to live with her family for 2 months to immerse myself in the language; another left for the US, became a Mayor and has recently run for Congress; others rose to senior academic, private sector or government posts, and at least three went on to be Ambassadors for their country.

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

But this was not to be our only posting to Seoul. In 1988, just before the Seoul Olympics opened, we were back again, for a three-year stay in what was by then dubbed an Asian Tiger economy. As well as huge growth in electronics manufacturing and exports, rural infrastructure had improved enormously, and Seoul and other cities had developed in leaps and bounds, not least with Olympic and science-related projects. But this time it was to be the political phase of South Korea's journey which was for me the most striking development. For the Olympics were successful not just as a sporting occasion but as a door-opening to the world, and this at a time when South Koreans were calling noisily, albeit peacefully, for democracy. Citizens from countries with which South Korea had had no contact poured in for the Olympics, and were hugely impressed by what they found. Soon South Korea would establish diplomatic relations and develop trade with them. Within another couple of years the Soviet Union was to collapse and the Berlin Wall was to come down. By the time we left in late 1991 democracy was imminent, there was no trace any longer of 'the Hermit Kingdom' label that Korea once wore, and both Koreas had become members of the UN.

Returning to Seoul in 2003 to serve for a third and last time, we found South Korea an established

democracy, enjoying lively politics, and a world leader in electronics, IT, cars, ships, steel and shipbuilding. It was also a mature economy, the 12th largest in the world, and soon to join, indeed to host, the G20. It was, and is, making a diverse and increasingly significant contribution on the international stage, whether in peacekeeping, the giving of aid, or in providing top figures for global institutions. Domestically it was undergoing fast-changing societal and cultural change and, an interesting development, growing multiculturalism. Its films, music, TV dramas, dance and traditional food were all becoming popular abroad, not just in Asia but in the West and elsewhere.

And all this achieved with, and despite, North Korea ever-present in the background, where people continue to suffer from a stagnant economy and tragic human rights violations, while the leadership lurches between nuclear threats and other hostile activities and appearing to want more cooperation. The contrast between the two Koreas today, and what they have – or have not – achieved over the past 40 years, could hardly be more stark.

Looking back, I count myself privileged to have experienced at first hand three major phases in the Republic of Korea's extraordinary development, as well as the evolution of an ever-closer relationship between the UK and South Korea. And I am in no doubt that being in Seoul for the last five years of President Park Chung-hee's time in office provided an invaluable point of reference for my subsequent postings to Seoul.

Both personally and as Chairman of the Anglo-Korean Society in the UK, I warmly welcome HE President Park Geun-hye, and wish her and her administration every success with her vision of happiness for the people of Korea and for the global village, and for her trust-building policy towards the North. **F**

The Anglo-Korean Society

The Anglo-Korean Society (AKS) was founded in 1956 to promote understanding and fellowship between the citizens and institutions of the UK and Korea. It seeks to bring together those in the UK who are interested in Korean matters. Its voluntary committee organizes a programme of events for its 200 individual and corporate members including talks, visits and networking events, and publishes a Newsletter. As part of its outreach, the AKS awards bursaries to post-graduate students focussing on Korea and modest grants to organisations which share its outlook. The ROK Ambassador in the UK is a Joint-President of the Society, which welcomes new members. For full details see www.anglokoreansociety.org.uk