Interview - Virginie Grzelczyk

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Dr Virginie Grzelczyk is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at Aston University, and the Associate Dean for Portfolio Development and Recruitment for the School of Social Sciences. She has received an MA in Diplomacy and Security from Ewha University in South Korea, and an MA and PhD in International Relations and Conflict Resolution from the University of Maryland in the United States. She specialises in security relationships and negotiation patterns over East Asia, especially over the Korean Peninsula. Previous publications have considered the process of the six-party talks, North Korea's energy security dilemma, Korean identity in the context of reunification, the notion of frozen conflict within the Korean sphere, and the concept of soft power within North Korea's foreign initiatives. Her latest book North Korea's New Diplomacy: Challenging Political Isolation in the 21st Century (Palgrave 2018) looks at North Korea's foreign policy in light of new and under-researched external relations.

Where do you see the most exciting research/ debates happening in your field?

Security and conflict studies focusing on the Korean peninsula, and more particularly on North Korea, have often been shaped by the prism of the Cold War. After the fall of the USSR, this trend persisted and locked part of the debate in one specific direction that only considered the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as an enemy, and as a state that would soon collapse. As a result, there has been little attention paid to development, needs, identity, as well as societal growth in the DPRK because most of the research had focused on the DPRK's military capabilities and nuclear threat. I find that critical security studies on the one hand, and new research on the empowerment of the Global South and the growing non-Western IR agenda on the other hand, to be extremely interesting to think about the DPRK not as the dangerous militarised state we are often presented with. Rather, the DPRK can be thought of as a relatively small state (albeit with nuclear capabilities) trying to navigate the international arena dominated by powers that have radically different quests and aims.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I remember growing up in France in the mid-1980s and the evening meal was always spent with the 8-o'clock news on. I have confused memories of the Iran-Iraq conflict; of French diplomats and journalists abducted by Hezbollah in Lebanon; of Perestroika and the fall of the Berlin wall. I had knowledge of facts, but few tools to understand why those things were happening. When I went abroad to spend a year in South Korea as an exchange student, I discovered a different reading of history, one that did not focus on time markers that I was familiar with. I also started to study political science, which gave me tools to slowly start to ask 'why is this going on' instead of 'what is going on'. Going on to study and work in the United States formatted my mind along clear IR lines of thought, and there was little departure from the traditional Realism/Liberalism line. Incidentally, leaving the United States to return to Europe and finally settling in the United Kingdom provided the most significant shift in my thinking: I had been aboard, outside of Europe for most of the critical shifts in the European Union, and returning to Europe made me appreciate a different political stride, one that is more concentrated on cooperation, institutionalisation and pluralism. This has led me to think differently about my work and research, and helped me consider critical alternative theories and debates I had not engaged with before.

How do you envision the development of bilateral relations between North and South Korea?

We have seen some interesting changes this year, though there is always a need to be cautious when considering any North and South rapprochement because we have been there before, even when the DPRK was not a nuclear power yet. I think it was extremely risky yet tremendously successful for the South Korean president Moon Jae In to work towards inviting the DPRK to the Pyeongchang Olympics back in February 2018. This particular fact has unfortunately been overshadowed by US president Donald Trump's announcement of the Singapore summit a few days after the Olympics, when both Koreas were busy just restarting their relationship and reciprocal visits were planned. It is undeniable that the United States is an important part of the strain we have seen on the Korean peninsula, and the United States will of course be critical in any formal and legal termination of the Korean armistice. Yet, what is more important to me is how both Koreas will behave with one another in the future, because they are neighbours and brothers in arms. There are obvious questions of difference in economic outputs and industrialisation, and of course of political values and systems.

I think the human aspect is, however, very important too and one that should not be neglected: if there is to be peaceful coexistence and eventual interactions, trades, travels and exchanges between the South and North Korean populations, the fracture between the Korean nation as a whole needs to be healed, since both Korean groups have been raised apart from one another for the better part of the last seven decades. So I would envision North and South relations to be hitting substantial difficulties once the technical side of things are launched. It is all fine to have connected train tracks, but at some point, one must decide who gets to go to the North and to the South; what goods can be loaded on the train and how many times this train goes back and forth. Ultimately, both North and South Korean societies will be changed by a renewed relationship and interface with one another. There will be costs involved for all, be they about money, or about loss of power over one's ideology. In essence, moving from low politics to high politics issues will be complex.

In North Korea's New Diplomacy you talk about the "politics of mainstreaming". In what ways is North Korea mainstreaming, and what are some of the reasons behind this?

The DPRK is interested, just like any other nation, in its survival. The North Korean regime, which has been in place for decades via hereditary successions, has a particular interest in maintaining their own position as well. The end of the Cold War left the DPRK without much of its traditional comrades and support, and Pyongyang had to seek avenues to get money to support its economy. While a large part of the DPRK's economy still remains connected to illicit trade, the DPRK has pursued a number of other ways to attract foreign currency. This has been done by having workers abroad, and being part of specific aspects of the international community. Those are actions that do not require the DPRK to change the fundamental nature of its regime or how its society is organised, and as such, the DPRK has sought to maximise some of these opportunities, just like any other country. Hence, focusing on attracting tourists to the DPRK, or showing a commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, allows the DPRK to polish its image to be more attractive to potential international partners.

How does the capricious nature of US-North Korean relations affect your research?

In essence, even though we seem to see something about the US-DPRK relationship in the news every day, there is little that is really changing when it comes to substance. To me and many others, the DPRK is, at this point, a nuclear power, even though the United States has not wanted to recognize this fact because it would be giving the DPRK and its leadership too much 'face'. I have advocated for a number of years now, the idea that there needs to be a conversation about nuclear weapons that moves beyond the 'get rid of your weapons and we will talk'. The DPRK will not renounce its nuclear weapons as they derive three main benefits from them: (1) they have a nuclear deterrent which will protect them from an attack, (2) they are able to receive concessions by bargaining over the weapons, (3) they are able to sell the technology for profit if they choose to do so (they themselves bought the know-how from Pakistani scientists). Accepting the DPRK's status as a nuclear power would launch a new discussion that would centre on how to be a responsible nuclear power. It would also centre on how to build a system, with the help of the International Atomic Energy Agency for example, to inspect and help the DPRK manage its nuclear capability, in the hope of avoiding an accident, and in the spirit of transparency. This was unfeasible until Donald Trump went to Singapore to meet with Kim Jong Un: suddenly, the US president gave an immense amount of credibility and face to the North Korean leader by meeting him directly and without pre-conditions. The meeting was hailed by the Trump

administration as an unprecedented one, something that no other US president had done before. This is the case, but there were reasons for US presidents to refuse meeting with a North Korean leader and giving them as much face as it is possible. Now, the only option for the US is to move forward on its promise to keep on engaging with the DPRK. From the DPRK side, Singapore was an immense victory, and one that the DPRK leadership is likely to exploit at home to maintain its own stronghold on the country by touting how the leadership is on par with the United States, its nemesis. What is important to remember though, is that just a year ago, the United States and the DPRK were trading aggressive rhetoric and the DPRK was testing missiles left, right and centre, and there was much talk of fire and fury on both sides. We are thus in a much less tense situation now, since dialogue has been initiated. How to move beyond what was, for both the United States and the DPRK, a very nice public relations stint is the important part, and is likely to take years if parties want to pursue the end of the Korean war and settle the question of North Korea's nuclear weapons. This will involve talking about specifics, details, stockpiles, and aspirations about the future, which will also require clear commitments on all side.

US-North Korea relations regularly dominate international news headlines. Is the media overlooking important developments between the United States and South Korea? What do you feel are the most important or interesting elements of US-South Korea relations at present?

The press in the United States often focuses on how the DPRK is threatening the United States but the reality is that the real victims to a potential nuclear strike, war, or even a mishandling of nuclear technology in North Korea, would be the Korean peninsula. As mentioned earlier, I think the real driver in what we have seen this year is the commitment South Korea has made to engaging with the North. What is also very interesting to me is the shifting narrative in South Korea regarding how the DPRK is represented and especially how the South Korean government justifies its cozying up to the North in recent months. The ROK (Republic of Korea) -DPRK summit that took place in September has been rattling for some in South Korea who see Moon Jae In's hugs with Kim Jong Un as distasteful considering the human right abuses the DPRK leadership has committed in the past, and how it is treating some of its citizens at present. Needless to say, the same dilemma is likely to take place in the DPRK where the North Korean press has vilified both the American people and the South Korean population and its leadership for years. When it comes to the US-ROK relationship, there is a question of coordination and priority that is still not quite settled. For example, it has taken the better part of two years for the United States to appoint an ambassador to Seoul, and this means that there is a problem when it comes to policy coordination. For better or worse, South Korean president Moon Jae In has also become the mediator, or middle man, between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump. This is a bit of a problem because he has to appeal to, and appease, both sides. Being a mediator also means that South Korea's own needs might take a back seat, and the DPRK-ROK relationship will once again depend on the United States' will and decisions. For the ROK, there are not many options given that most of its security is still assured by American military forces.

In the introduction to North Korea's New Diplomacy you write that "[l]ooming ahead is the personal hope that there can be a place where the DPRK can develop and North Korean citizens find a measure of security and happiness". Do you still agree with this statement? Do you write with this same level of optimism?

What I meant by 'hope' in this particular sentence was less about being optimistic but more about wanting to think we can achieve more than the current stalemate, and that there can be reduced uncertainties and difficulties for the Korean people. When I am being asked about how I perceive the DPRK, two contrasting moments often come to my mind. The first moment was waking up on December 19, 2011 to hear on the radio that Kim Jong Il had died. When I heard the news, I started to cry. Not because I was sad that he had died, but because I truly thought that something ought to shift now, that something was going to change within North Korean society and that people's lives would improve. This was also a time when, as I like to call it, 'the stars were aligned': with Kim Jong Il gone and Barack Obama, perhaps something would change but as we know, Obama's strategic patience toward the DPRK was quite disappointing as it cemented the death of a number of engagement processes including the 6-Party Talks.

The second moment was when was in the streets of Pyongyang in North Korea when children came out of school one afternoon. I had closed my eyes and the sounds that came to me were of kids' shoes and bags rubbing against

one another, laughter, juvenile taunting and mindless wrestling. This sounded like any kids from any country getting out of school. It is this slice of life I often remember when I think about the DPRK, and when I think about what matters: regardless of how constrained life is for North Korean people, life exists, with its pains and suffering for many, but with moment of happiness, friendships, and the love and care of one's family for them too. This is no different from anywhere else, and this needs to be remembered more when thinking about what matters.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations?

Read, talk, experience, and consider going beyond your own discipline. There are obvious methodological concerns and differences when you consider other fields, but there is a richness that comes from considering how others think about the word that is undeniable. My current research project is funded by the Leverhulme Trust and focuses on the Politics of Toys in Conflict and Conflict Spheres. Though I look at both the DPRK and ROK and how their own toys represent a historical reality, I also look at Iran, and the Balkans as case studies. This particular research goes much beyond the confines of IR theory to look at legal frameworks, anti-western feelings, toy producers' markets and incentives, as well how violence manifests itself through play and as part of children's development. This is very much beyond my IR/Conflict Resolution training, and is refreshing to consider the world, and my work, in a different way. It is still about security, and power, and people, but it is about more, which I hope will help shape my understanding of IR further and hopefully contribute some new insights to the discipline.