A Short History of Contemporary North Korea and International Politics

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Background History Up to Current Status: America, Russia, North Korea and the Cold War

Up to the end of the 19th century, the people of Korea led a reasonably peaceful, agrarian life in a territory about the size of Mississippi. For thousands of years, despite part of their country being conquered by the Chinese or Japanese, they managed to thrive in a land that was not particularly hospitable—mountainous, rocky soil, short growing season, and few harbors. Efforts to invade Korea generally failed to last because the costs outweighed the gains; Korea was poor. Because it bordered in the north on China, which exercised a strong influence on its political and economic well being, it was much influenced by Chinese philosophy and language, especially by Confucianism. Korean daily life reflected the Confucian ideals of orderliness and correct relations between government and citizens, family relations, and social customs. And because it had almost no contact with cultures outside China and Japan, other than with a few missionaries from the West who were killed, and some American "gunboat diplomacy," it viewed outsiders as barbarians.

From the end of the 19th century to the end of World War II, Korea along with China was tyrannized and terrorized by Japanese occupation. Koreans were told they could not even speak their own language at home, women were forced into prostitution and men into slave labor (even today there are towns in northern China that are predominately Korean and a source of much tourism, especially between South Korea and China). The best known Korean guerrilla fighter against Japan's empire from the 1930s on, was Kim Il Sung. After the Japanese unconditional surrender to the Americans following the first and only use to date of atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he became the popular, defacto leader of North Korea with the help of Russian military support. No sooner than the Japanese surrendered in 1945, the American and Russian allies began a "proxy fight" for control of the Korean peninsula through their Korean friends in the north and south, respectively. The Russians wished to prevent an American military presence on continental Asia which could pose a future threat, so they refused to cooperate with an American-backed UN team sent to Korea to set up an election for the Korean
people to elect a government in 1948. The election was held in the south, and quickly followed by the Russians and Kim Il Sung in the north, thus creating the two governments we have to this day.

To understand what happened next--the Korean War of 1950-53--and why that set the path of both North and South Korea to the present day, we must broaden the context past even China, Japan and the USA. The first half of the 20th century was racked by two world wars, both begun by Germany. Germany was the last of the great European military and economic powers to try to carve out a world empire for themselves. For centuries European technological progress, fueled by the great innovations of science and the wedding of military and industrial might, enabled their governments to expand their control over other cultures and their governments. The UK, French, and Russian empires had managed to reach a rough equilibrium with each other and lesser European colonizers such as the Dutch (the Netherlands) and the Belgians. But they had not with the Germans. Doing what came habitually to Europeans in general, the Germans twice proceeded to expand through intimidation and conquest into territories controlled by other empires. Similarly, the Japanese, adopting German constitutional structure, law, and military strategy, proceeded to do in China more forcefully what had already been started by the Europeans half a century earlier, effectively exercising suzerainty over large areas of China.

The USA was twice drawn into these world wars--worldwide because of the far-reaching interests of the European colonial empires--well after they began in Europe and Asia, and only because of direct attacks against them--the sinking of American ships and the attack on Pearl Harbor. The attitude in the USA was predominately one not of isolation as is often said by the critics of American culture, but of anti-colonialism (Americans did not view their period of expansion in the 19th century as colonialism. Too much else such as the War of 1812, the American Civil War and the "carpetbagger" era that followed, the end of slavery and the "underground railroad," the industrial revolution, the Gold Rush, and the settling of the North American continent by largely European immigrants of all kinds, occupied the attention of the public culture.)

By the end of World War II, Americans were generally disgusted with war but happy to have defeated Germany and Japan. A twelve million man military was reduced to about 300,000 in only two years; 40% of the USA economy that had been engaged in military production was reduced to 1% of the economy. By 1947 we had all but disarmed, leaving only token occupation forces in Germany and Japan. But this was not true of Russia. They retained a twelve million man military, 3 million in Europe alone. They tried to expand their USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) into all of eastern Europe and indeed wherever they could find a government willing to become communist or be taken over in revolution by a communist faction. The reason for this behavior was not hard to see, communist ideology aside. Three times in the first half of the 20th century they had been victims of vicious attacks from western powers: first the "White Wars" following the communist revolution of 1917, then World War I, then World War II. They had been occupied for two years by the Germans, from their western border with Europe up
to the Ural Mountains. They were not about to make the same mistake again; their goal was to establish a "buffer" of docile if not friendly peoples, between them and the rest of Europe. Looking east, they did not want to see Japan rise again the way Germany had, and so they tried to divide Japan the same way Germany had been. However, their forces only got as far as the Kurile Islands (Japan's "Northern Territories") before the Americans occupied the main Japanese islands. Similarly, they had only gotten as far as the northern part of Korea by the end of the war.

So, by 1947, Korea was occupied no longer by the Japanese or under Chinese influence, but by two western superpowers, Russia and the USA, one wanting to prevent the other from gaining a land base on the Asian continent, the other (the USA) wanting that base to help its ally, the Chinese government. Chaing Kai-shek, a general and long-time leader of China, was fighting his political enemy, General Mao Tse-tung, for control of China. Chaing and Mao, political enemies long before the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and China, joined forces to beat back the Japanese and were succeeding up to the Japanese surrender. They then proceeded to continue their political struggle and turned China into a battle zone once again. This internal war continued until December of 1949, almost a year and a half after the two Koreas were created.

One other piece of the puzzle needs to be put into place. By 1947, it had become clear to American politicians and military leaders, that Russia was going to pose a threat to peace in Europe, a threat to which we could not respond effectively given our disarmament, without a long delay that could prove catastrophic to Europe and in time to us. Thus that year saw the passage of the National Security Act. Never before had this country had a large, permanent intelligence agency, and what amounted to a war council. The National Security Act created the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense (the Pentagon) and Joint Chiefs of Staff, the National Security Council, and launched the "Truman Doctrine" which basically announced that wherever communism threatened a government, we would offer that government our assistance. The next year, the USA along with the UK and other allies, brought the state of Israel into existence as well as South Korea. Thus only three years after World War II, the USA was fully into a new war, a new kind of war, a war not in name or with the loss of American life, but a war nonetheless, a war involving a billion people in dozens of countries, a war costing hundreds of billions of dollars in the end, and which would eventually result in the death of millions--the "Cold War."

After the creation of the two Koreas in 1948, with Russian help North Korea immediately began a military buildup and economic infrastructure that was suited to capitalizing on its natural resources--the mining of coal, metals and other minerals, refinement using coal and hydroelectric power (plentiful due to its mountainous terrain). This period saw huge advances in literacy and industrialization of the North; even today with all its difficulties, North Korea is 99% literate, and has life expectancies of 68 for men and 74 for women. The North Korean people were spurred on not simply by a brutal communist regime, but a regime that capitalized on a half-century of fear and hatred of the Japanese occupation. Further, it was one that did not represent a radical departure from Confucian values but instead represented those values in a hierarchical system.
modeled on the centralized Japanese bureaucratic, authoritarian system. Even communism was not a new ideology to the Korean people since it had one of the oldest communist parties in Asia, but it was new in its practical implications. Told that the South was a puppet government for a new colonial power, that the Americans were simply replacing the Japanese, and that having the support of an ally that assisted it to defeat the Japanese (Russia), it is not hard to see that North Korea was actually established on a strong foundation.

The Korean War must go down in history as a deadly error on all sides. Kim Il Sung, backed if not prodded by Stalin, attacked the South just two years after the North was created and just six months after Mao forced Chaing, the USA ally, to flee to Taiwan with a million of his followers. The USA still had hopes of Chaing's return to China, and General MacArthur, then Governor of Japan, was sure of victory. Ultimately, his poor judgment brought the Chinese into the war, resulted in a almost a million Koreans losing their lives, roughly 1.5-2 million Chinese, and a stalemate instead of what seemed to be a sure victory after forcing the North Korean army back deeply into its own territory. Worse, it strengthened an alliance of convenience between China and Russia that lasted over a decade and reduced Chaing's slim chances of a return to China to zero.

As the Cold War deepened, the North Korean government was encouraged to continue deepening the hatred of its people for the South Korean government, the USA, and the Europeans in general. Remember that Israel and North Korea were created in the same year as part of the Cold War maneuverings of the USA and Russia. Russia saw in the North an opportunity to extend the Cold War into subversive, covert operations by helping the North become a source of terrorism. Because it was a society that traditionally had been homogeneous ethnically, hierarchically structured, and isolationist (even referring to itself as the "hermit kingdom"), Russian encouragement to move in this direction was consistent with its experience. The "west," in the form of European hegemony over China, the American "invasion" of the South, and the apparent effort to dominate the Arab world through the creation of Israel, gave every indication that it was bent on destroying the North. Seeing itself as grateful to Russian and Chinese supporters who saved it from annihilation at the hands of the USA and its "puppet" government in the South, and lacking the ability to wage conventional war, it turned to the tools of the weak, fostering guerrilla movements and terrorist attacks, for which service it was well paid.

Thus the 1950s saw intelligence gathering through infiltrators into South Korea. The 1960s then saw these efforts turn to hundreds of commando raids and some assassination attempts; by 1968 a direct assault was attempted on the "Blue House," the South Korean equivalent of the White House. Terrorism towards the South continued into the 1980s and peaked in 1983 with the killing of 18 South Korean officials in Rangoon, Burma, narrowly missing then President Chun Doo Hwan.

Rise to Military Power in the 1990s
The Library of Congress summarizes the rise of North Korea power as an exporter of terrorist and guerrilla training and support as follows:

By 1990 North Korea had provided military training to groups in sixty-two countries--twenty-five in Africa, nineteen in Central and South America, nine in Asia, seven in the Middle East, and two in Europe. A cumulative total of more than 5,000 foreign personnel have been trained in North Korea, and over 7,000 military advisers, primarily from the Reconnaissance Bureau, have been dispatched to some forty-seven countries. As of mid-1993, military advisers from North Korea were in approximately twelve African countries. North Korea is a convenient alternative to the superpowers for military assistance.

In the Mideast and North Africa, North Korea aided Egypt, for instance by piloting Egyptian aircraft in the 1973 war; and aided Libya in its conflict with Egypt in 1977. For the decade ending in 1987, quoting from the Library of Congress study again (citing the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency as its source),

North Korea earned US$3.9 billion from arms transfers to over thirty countries in

Africa, the Middle East, and Central America, and spent some US$2.8 billion on arms imports from China and the Soviet Union. Purchases included aircraft, missiles, trucks, radars, and command, control, communications, and intelligence equipment. Exports to Iran of approximately US$2.8 million comprised 71 percent of total weapons exports. Arms sales during the peak year 1982 represented 38 percent of North Korea's total exports. Arms exports between 1981 and 1987 averaged around 27 percent of exports annually, with a 1981 high of 40 percent and a 1986 low of 14 percent.

North Korea now ranks 5th in size of its conventional military forces in the world, with about 1.1 million men under arms (comparable to India with 1.1, Russia with 1.2, and the US with 1.4; see the North Korea Advisory Group's 1999 Report to the Speaker, US House of Representatives).

Since the early '90s, North Korean has turned its attention to increasingly sophisticated weapons systems, including nuclear, biological and chemical ("NBC") weapons of mass destruction ("WMD"). In 1998, it successfully launched one Taepodong 1 missile directly over Japan, clearly indicating it had developed sufficient expertise to attack not only Japan but also the USA with NBC weapons, creating the possibility of at least isolated terrorist attacks. This fear came to a head in 1994, by which time the stakes had risen to the point where a agreement was vital between the USA and North Korea on halting the production of nuclear fuel for atomic bombs. The 1994 so-called "Agreed Framework" effectively halted North Korean production of weapons grade fuel, and committed both the USA and North Korea to working towards normalizing relations, making the Korean peninsula free from nuclear weapons, and strengthening the international non-proliferation regime. Further, to replace the loss of potential power from the nuclear
power plant development that was halted, a Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization ("KEDO") was created with the intent of building a light-water reactor. This has yet to be begun.

Despite the concern for secrecy in the North much more can be said about both the North's weapons systems development and the motivations underlying their actions. We have direct testimony of high-ranking defectors, careful intelligence assessments assembled by such independent and respected organizations as the Federation of American Scientists, and many publicly available materials generated by our government (see notes below for gateway websites to these materials). Let's look at a sample.

Colonel Ju-hwal Choi defected from the People's Army in North Korea in 1995; in his testimony before the U.S. Congress in 1997, he stated the following regarding his government's weapons of mass destruction. Note the motivations underlying its development of these weapons.

It is widely known in North Korea that North Korea produces, deploys and stockpiles two or three nuclear warheads and toxic material such as over 5,000 tons of toxic gas. It also developed and deployed rockets such as Nodong 1 and Nodong 2 with a range of 1,000 Km. The North Korean people know that the North is at the final stage of developing Taepodong rockets with a range of 5,000 Km. North Korea acquires powerful and destructive weaponry with political and military purposes in mind. By having the weapons, the North is able to prevent itself from being slighted by such major powers as the U.S., Russia, China and Japan and also to gain the upper hand in political negotiations and talks with them.

From the viewpoint of traditional "power politics," (realpolitik or "realistic politics"), this is a very sensible statement. The use of military power for political coercion is a normal, traditional activity in international relations as any world history or world civilization class will attest. For example, the colonial empires of the UK, France, the Russian empire (USSR), the short-lived German empire, all were the cause of untold human misery and death in the 20th century.

We used to characterize Kim Jong-il, his father Kim Il Sung, and their government, as somehow aberrant, even insane. By isolating them from the rest of international relations if not the human race, we did ourselves, the American people and their public assessment of American foreign policy, a disservice. Democratic governments at root must rely on informed consent of the governed; a democratic leadership that does not inform its people cannot act rationally but only duplicitously. Such governments make decisions increasingly based on the need to act in a manner consistent with their own propaganda. When this happens, self-delusion is assured.

This lesson was made obvious in the first and so far only visit of Kim Jong-il to Seoul in 2000. What a shock to see an educated, good-humored fellow treating the
media, the President of South Korea Kim Dae-jung, and all others he met, with respect and intelligent dialog. The myth of his insanity, paranoia, megalomania, and so on, just evaporated.

**The Collapse of the North Korean Economy and Ending "Isolation"**

Regarding NBC weapons, North Korea has already indicated its willingness to sacrifice some measure of secrecy to assure greater USA compliance in lifting economic sanctions. The concern with sanctions is due to the convergence of three developments: (1) the decline and finally end of significant Russian and Chinese economic aid, as both move towards greater rapprochement with the USA, the EC and Japan; (2) the obsolescence of North Korean industrial structure and agricultural disasters partly due to weather conditions but also to mismanagement; and (3) the policy of normalization (1998 "sunshine policy") advocated by South Korean President Kim Dae-jung which has brought about the beginnings of a new trade regime and investment opportunities between the two Koreas. Further, both Japan and the USA (through the UN) have shown their willingness to aid the North with food and medical assistance averting the worst effects of their agricultural crisis. Regarding Sino-Russian aid, the end of the Cold War with the partial democratization of Russia and collapse of its empire, and China’s economic push towards capitalism and joining the WTO, have made their relations increasingly difficult with North Korea. The focus has shifted from Cold War politics and Korean peninsula brinkmanship to managing economic globalization processes through various financial crises and adapting to a freer trade and capital flow regimen. North Korea, whether it admits it or not, is seeing itself left behind by the major powers, with its only legacy its ability to intimidate through promoting terrorism.

It is not coincidental then, that a year after the Taepodong-1 missile was fired, we see a thorough reassessment of North Korean relations by the USA (the "Perry Report"), the establishment of a Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group ("TCOG") consisting of South Korea, the USA and Japan to coordinate their policies towards North Korea; and the latter take the first steps needed to establish relations with the UK and the EC (through its friends in Sweden). Last year (2000) for the first time an envoy of North Korean leader visited the USA, which together announced a joint communiqué stating that they no longer had hostile intentions and would work to develop a new relationship free from the past.

With the meeting of South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader, General Secretary Kim Jong-il, June 13-15, 2000, in Pyongyang, more than one myth was dispelled. First, they agreed to work independently and together for reunification, settle humanitarian issues such as reuniting families, promote balanced economic growth for Korea as a whole and across all areas (economic, social and cultural), and to reciprocate Kim Dae-jung’s visit to Pyongyang with a visit by Kim Jong-il to Seoul "at an appropriate time."
Problems with the USA

It is apparent today (October 2001) that North Korea's emergence from the Cold War is a vital step towards containing if not eliminating global terrorism. North Korea has been the, one might say, "traditional" training ground for terrorists, and it itself has used terrorism in its efforts to rid itself of South Korea. The economic consequences of the bombing of the World Trade Center using two jumbo jets as bombs, as well as the attack on the Pentagon, make it clear that economic globalization is a process that cannot go forward, or even stay intact, in the presence of a significant terrorist threat. Given this, what problems are likely to emerge for North Korean relations with the USA, the EC and the rest of the world? First, North Korea is likely to be under even more intense, effective and sustained pressure to give up exporting terrorism or conducting terrorist acts itself. But will the USA be willing to pay the price that it must to achieve this objective? Normalizing relations with North Korea may mean not a merger of the two Koreas, but a neutralization of both, a kind of "Switzerland of the Pacific," a withdrawal of USA forces from the region, one of China's long-cherished objectives. It may mean an economic development program that creates an economic infrastructure on the Korean peninsula that challenges Japan and significantly strengthens China's industrial north. Already South Korea is speaking of a railroad connecting Seoul and Pyongyang to Moscow. Such developments are a long way off, but as the pace of current events tells us, that doesn't mean either unlikely or undesirable.

Notes

North Korea Reference Material on the Web

I. USA Government Sources

Central Intelligence Agency, World Factbook:  

Department of State,

Background Notes: http://www.state.gov/www/background_notes/n-korea_0010_bgn.html


II. North Korean Source

Korean Central New Agency: http://www.kcna.co.jp/
III. NGOs


Adversary Foreign Intelligence Threat Handbook, Section 3:
http://www.fas.org/irp/nsa/ioss/threat96.part3.htm

The Cold War Museum: links to the 1950s: http://www.coldwar.org/articles/50s/links.php3

IV. Essays

Richard W. Chadwick, "Notes on the Cold War Structure in Korea: Can It Be Dissolved?"
http://www2.hawaii.edu/~chadwick/KINUessay.rtf

Ju-hwal Choi,