From One Korea to Two

The Korean War set North and South Korea on separate paths—one toward democracy and prosperity, the other toward tyranny and famine

By Merrill Perlman

If you decide to visit North Korea, don't bother taking your laptop or your cellphone. Even if the North Koreans let you in—and that's not likely—they're going to keep your devices out. Besides, the Internet is heavily restricted, and about the only place with cell service in this country the size of Pennsylvania is the capital, Pyongyang.

Unlike South Korea, the modern and democratic nation with which it shares the peninsula, North Korea has few cars, few factories—which mostly make military equipment—a lot of hunger, and the sense that the country hasn't moved very far into the 20th century, much less the 21st.

North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Il, rules 23 million people with an iron hand and very bizarre behavior: He almost always appears in public in a khaki jumpsuit, oversize sunglasses, and platform shoes; he rarely smiles, and has a taste for caviar and Rambo movies. Jon Stewart called him "a comic supervillain."

Yet he has made his nation into a nuclear power and has the uncanny ability to confound far larger and more powerful countries—most notably the United States, China, and Russia.

This contrast—a repressed, hungry citizenry that lays food at statues of its leaders, while those leaders play cat-and-mouse with the West—has existed since the three-year Korean War began 60 years ago, in June 1950.

The Korean Peninsula—with its mountainous industrialized north, rich with minerals and hydroelectric potential, and a strong agricultural base in the south—was long coveted by Korea's neighbors, Russia, Japan, and China, which fought several wars over it. Japan annexed the peninsula in 1910 and brutally suppressed Korean culture in favor of Japanese.

As World War II ended with the defeat of Japan in 1945, the Soviet Union rushed troops into Korea from the north, and the U.S. sent troops in from the south. They agreed to divide the country along the 38th Parallel line of latitude bisecting the country.

The division was supposed to last only until Japanese influence could be removed. But in 1948, Korean nationalists in the north led by Kim Il Sung, a communist-leaning guerrilla, declared the Democratic People's Republic. With Soviet help, Kim built a strong army and assumed dictatorial powers.

The Cold War

South Korea held elections sponsored by the United Nations, and Syngman Rhee became the nation's first President; he aggressively promoted attacking North Korea and used troops to control civil unrest at home.

At the same time, the Cold War, which pitted the U.S. and its Western allies against their Communist foes in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere, was heating up. In 1949, China fell to the armies of the Mao Zedong. In Europe, the U.S. was airlifting supplies to West Berlin to keep it from falling under Soviet control, and a civil war in Greece led America's leaders to believe Greece and Turkey might become Communist.

President Harry S. Truman had already declared that as the world's leader, the U.S. had a responsibility to protect nations threatened by communism; the fear was that if one nation fell to the Communists, another would follow, and so on, like dominoes. (This became known as the "Domino Theory.")

So when North Korean troops crossed the 38th Parallel on June 25, 1950, claiming they were retaliating for a South Korean attack, those conditions "made it nearly impossible for President Truman not to act," says Paul Edwards, founder of the Center for the Study of the Korean War in Independence, Missouri. North Korean troops quickly advanced 25 miles to the outskirts of Seoul, the South Korean capital.

At the urging of General Douglas MacArthur, a World War II hero who was in charge of the occupation of Japan, the U.S. sent troops and equipment to support the South Koreans, under the U.N. flag. But by early September, North Korea controlled nearly the entire peninsula.

MacArthur devised a surprise attack: 40,000 soldiers and Marines would land at the rocky shore of Inchon on the west coast, behind enemy lines, to cut supply lines and trap North Korean troops.

The gamble paid off. MacArthur and his troops recaptured much of the south and returned Rhee's government to Seoul. The war might have ended there if it weren't for fear of "the Reds." Buoyed by his success and his own aversion to communism, MacArthur moved across the 38th Parallel. President Truman, hoping to keep the Soviet Union and China out of the war, advocated diplomacy instead of pressing a new offensive. But MacArthur persisted, assuring Truman that Chinese and Soviet forces would not interfere.

He was wrong: As Allied troops took Pyongyang in early November and moved toward North Korea's border with China, 300,000 Chinese troops attacked, followed by half a million more by the end of the year, completely altering the war's arithmetic.

With China's attack, Americans' support for the war began to erode. MacArthur's behavior didn't help. In March 1951, without consulting Washington, he sent an ultimatum ordering the Chinese to surrender. In April, Truman fired MacArthur.

But by June 1951 the war was effectively stalemated where it began, at the 38th Parallel. Battles and negotiations for peace stuttered for more than a year.

In the meantime, a weary Truman, a Democrat, had decided not to run for a third term. The November 1952 election was won in a landslide by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, a Republican and another World War II hero.

Though Eisenhower pushed for renewed vigor in the talks, they dragged on, interrupted by offensives on both sides, including a bitter battle in April 1953 over a relatively inconsequential piece of land called "Pork Chop Hill," which resulted in the deaths of more than 100 Americans.

Finally, on July 27, 1953, an armistice was signed in Panmunjom, North Korea, creating a two-mile-wide "demilitarized zone" around the 38th Parallel. But after the deaths of 34,000 Americans, 500,000 South Korean troops and civilians, an estimated 500,000 to 1.4 million Chinese and North Koreans, and a few thousand soldiers from other Allied countries, the border between North and South Korea was virtually where it had been when the war began.

General Mark W. Clark, the commander of the U.N. forces, would later write that he was "the first United States Army commander in history to sign an armistice without victory."

Rhee, the South Korean President, refused to sign. The North and South remained technically at war.

The 'Great Leader'

For nearly 40 years after that, South Korea swung between democracy and authoritarianism, going through a succession of coups, elections, riots, and assassinations even as its economy continued to develop. Elections in 1988 ushered in the South's current period of prosperity and its emergence as a manufacturing powerhouse, with the 15th-largest economy in the world.

In North Korea, Kim Il Sung also industrialized, but he believed in self-reliance, which in effect meant isolation. A cult of personality grew up around him, and people referred to him as their "Great Leader."

Kim built a million-strong military, and while there were occasional crises—in 1968, the North Koreans seized an American intelligence ship, the Pueblo, and imprisoned its crew for 11 months—there were also occasional but feeble attempts to make peace with South Korea. But most nations wouldn't trade with or give aid to North Korea, sinking it deeper into isolation.

As a result, North Korea didn't benefit from the technological changes that allowed South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China to prosper. And "the collapse of the Communist bloc in the early 1990s left North Korea with few friends," The Times wrote. "Since then, North Korea, a dictatorship armed to the teeth but unable to feed its own people without foreign aid, has specialized in provoking the international community for survival."

Kim turned to trying to build a nuclear bomb. As the West pressured him to suspend his nuclear program, he would appear to back down under promises of aid, only to renege.

Tensions were high in May 1994, when Kim agreed to a first-ever summit meeting with leaders from South Korea. But he died 17 days before the meeting was to begin.

His oldest son, Kim Jong Il, already being called "Dear Leader," took over. The Times wrote, "The man who is expected to be the next leader of North Korea has been described as a ruthless terrorist, a spoiled playboy, and an erratic manager who will have trouble keeping control of his country."

The younger Kim continued North Korea's nuclear program even as his country spiraled downward. Disastrous floods in the mid-1990s led to a huge famine and forced him to reconsider that total isolation, with a North-South summit finally taking place in 2000. Families separated by the war for more than 40 years were allowed a brief (and highly scripted) reunion.

But the North and South are still technically at war today, and tensions remain high, with about 28,000 U.S. troops stationed in the South on alert.

Nuclear Threat

"The primary cause of the war remains unsolved: the issue of unification," says Edwards of the Center for the Study of the Korean War. And North Korea's years of isolation "has put it in a position of having nothing left to lose." The solution, he says, "if there is one, lies in the world's ability to draw North Korea back into economic participation, and to seek some means of unifying Korea."

But in October 2006, North Korea announced it had exploded a nuclear bomb. And early last year, it tested ballistic missiles, expelled U.N. nuclear inspectors, and scrapped all of its agreements with South Korea.

Kim Jong Il, who had a stroke in 2008, has designated his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, as his probable successor, passing over his eldest, Kim Jong Nam, who apparently fell from favor after trying to enter Japan on a fake passport so he could go to Disneyland.

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