Korea - The Endgame

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The Korean peninsula has had a troubled history but nothing quite compares with the tragedy of its American-inspired division in the twentieth century; or the war that inexorably followed; or the permanent conflict that has ensued. It is not simply that so many millions of people died or that so many families have been torn apart. It is that a festering and unresolved geopolitical sore has been created; one that has made matters worse; one that has exposed the peninsula to competing political interests, contributed to social dysfunction and disadvantage and made northeast Asia more dangerous. China, Russia and South Korea have understandable interests in the stability of the peninsula by reason of their adjoining borders. Japan has a legitimate interest by reason of its geographic proximity and its historical relationship. The United States – the original proponent of the division - has neither borders nor proximity. Its underlying interest is in the maintenance of its regional hegemony and in pushing back against the rise of China in the Asia-Pacific region.

The division

The fateful proposal that the Korean nation should be divided at the 38th parallel was an American initiative, made by a little known war-time policy committee known as the State-War-Navy Co-ordinating Committee - called 'Swink' after its acronym SWNCC. It was a precursor to the National Security Council. The proposed dividing line was selected on 10 August 1945 by two young colonels from the State Department working late in the evening in the Pentagon. They were given half an hour for the task and a map of 'Asia and Adjacent Areas' from a 1942 National Geographic magazine. One of the colonels was Dean Rusk.

The partition was a unilateral initiative. The United Kingdom was not consulted, nor any other allied power. Korea was ignored. It was prompted by the entry of the Soviet army into Manchuria and came in the immediate aftermath of the detonation of atomic bombs on Hiroshima on 6 August and Nagasaki on 9 August. Stalin acquiesced, intriguingly and without demur. The division of Korea was not entirely without precedent, as Imperial Russia and Japan had considered a partition in 1896 and again in 1903 – although the military and State Department men in SWNCC had no idea of those events.[1]

The determining consideration had been Russia's intervention in the Pacific war. Stalin had agreed at the Yalta Conference to enter the war against Japan within three months of the end of the war in Europe. The German surrender took place on 8 May 1945 and precisely three months later, on the evening of 8 August, Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov informed the Japanese ambassador of his government's hostile intentions. That night around midnight, the Soviet army moved into Manchuria on a grand scale. Its front, consisting of three army groups, 1.5 million men and over 5,000 tanks, extended more than 4,600 kilometres from the Pacific coast to eastern inner Mongolia. Its manifest ability to occupy the whole of the Korean peninsula before American forces could arrive was a source of consternation in the Pentagon. By 10 August the first elements of the Russian 25th Army had entered northeast Korea. A fortnight later they had completed occupation as far south as Pyongyang. By 1 September they had effected occupation to the 38th parallel. So impressed was one American military historian that he named the Soviet invasion of Manchuria and the Korean peninsula 'Operation August Storm'[2].

A divided Korea was not what Franklin Delano Roosevelt had contemplated. But he died in April and President Truman was a different, more conservative man. Roosevelt had embraced a post-war world order that included a vision of a free and independent Korea, to be preceded by a period of international trusteeship to prepare it for self-rule. As early as March 1943, he raised the concept of a trusteeship of Korea with the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden; and the principle was subsequently embodied in the Cairo Declaration in December that year. Shortly afterwards, he raised it with Stalin,[3] who responded favourably, although he thought the period of trusteeship should be as short as possible. On 2 August 1945 the final proclamation at the Potsdam Conference in Brandenburg reiterated that 'the terms of the Cairo declaration shall be carried out'.

But as the radioactive fallout from Hiroshima and Nagasaki settled over Japan, a not so subtle metamorphosis was occurring in Washington. Roosevelt's concept of an international trusteeship for Korea was buried by Truman's implacable anti-communist resolve. The United States had invited and encouraged the Soviet army's movement into Manchuria and Korea and had urged Russia to declare war on Japan, but some in Washington were beginning to have reservations. There was a newfound perception of the strategic importance of denying a substantial part of Korea to Soviet Russia. One historian noted drily that 'The fate of the Korean peninsula suddenly became of interest to the Americans'.[4]

The change of thinking by the Truman administration led to a change of direction that altered the course of history in the region. Russia's aspirations were entirely expected. It had long held a natural and understandable

A North Korean soldier stands watch at the Demilitarized Zone July 17, 2008. Photo: US Defense Dept / Wikimedia Commons

interest in Korea and Manchuria, where it had been humiliated in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). But the United States had not previously expressed any strategic interest or concern. It had even been advised internally that, in return for their assistance in the war against Japan, the Soviets 'would want all of Manchuria, Korea and possibly parts of North China'[5]. This was the price to be paid. And the reason was clear. Until the atomic bomb made it unnecessary, the Americans expected heavy losses in their planned invasion of the Japanese mainland but believed that the casualties to be incurred by the Russians in invading Manchuria and Korea would be greater. A Joint Chiefs of Staff document stated unambiguously that 'our objective should be to get the Russians to deal with the Japs in Manchuria (and Korea if necessary)'[6]. The quid pro quo for persuading the Russians to do the nasty work was the known probability that they would appropriate Manchurian and Korean territory on their far eastern border.

But in August 1945, when the Soviet army entered the war, Truman and those advising him decided that they no longer wanted to pay the price, at least in Korea. The balance had shifted, as it so often seems to do, in favour of those who preferred confrontation, the establishment of clear territorial boundaries and the use of military force and occupation. For ideological reasons, Washington wanted a defensive wall. And so it made a scramble for Korea.

Thus only a week after Potsdam, one of America's most pressing political and military objectives suddenly became the perceived need to secure and cement an artificial division of Korea at the 38th parallel - and to occupy the country south of the proposed dividing line as soon as possible. It was a purely reactionary and strategic decision that marked the beginning of the most anomalous period in Korean history since 668 CE, when the kingdom was first substantially unified. Not only did the partition ignore the Korean people but its practical effect was to undermine Roosevelt's notion of trusteeship, with its correlative standard of international fiduciary behaviour 'higher than that trodden by the crowd'[7]. For it was patent that once division and competing antagonistic occupations were imbedded, future unification would be increasingly unlikely - as it surely proved to be.

One former US Foreign Service officer proffered this heartfelt and damning description –

> 'No division of a nation in the present world is so astonishing in its origin as the division of Korea; none is so unrelated to conditions or sentiment within the nation itself at the time the division was effected; none is to this day so unexplained; in none does blunder and planning oversight appear to have played so large a role… [and] there is no division for which the US government bears so heavy a share of the responsibility as it bears for the division of Korea'.[8]

B-29s of the US Air Force drop their 500-pound bombs over North Korea

The arbitrary division of the Korean peninsula was an invitation to conflict. It made a war for the reunification of the peninsula inevitable and it created a source of discord and international tension that remains unresolved. When war arrived less than five years later, it became the first of America's failed modern wars and its first modern war against China. The conflict launched the long era of expanding American global force projection and marked the true beginning of the American Century.

The war

Few Americans know the true history of the Korean war. Few understand how Washington tragically chose to continue the war after October 1950, despite the warnings of China and the apprehensions of the British. Fewer still are prepared to accept any responsibility for the consequences that have ensued or the impasse that now exists. The war started as a United Nations 'police action' to repel the North Korean invasion and restore peace at the border. After three months, Kim Il-sung's ambitious attempt to reunify the peninsula with Soviet tanks had been defeated, the mandate of the United Nations Security Council achieved and the North Korean forces pushed back to the 38th parallel. But as has happened so often since, Washington's ideological and military enthusiasm ensured a wider and more substantial conflagration – continuing the war for nearly three more years. Civilian deaths among the Korean people are estimated to have been more than three million - but we will never know.

After repelling the invasion, the unnecessary American-led crusade to cross the 38th parallel, to invade North Korea, to impose regime change and to threaten the Chinese border on the Yalu River, was a calamity. The following words are as apt for Korea, as they were for Vietnam, and for so many subsequent American interventions – 'In attempting to snuff out a small war they produced instead a massive conflagration. Determined to demonstrate the efficacy of force employed on a limited scale, they created a fiasco over which they were incapable of exercising any control whatsoever'[9].

In late October, China reacted by entering the conflict in force - using exceptional infantry tactics. The resulting retreat by the US Eighth Army was not merely the longest in American military history but 'the most disgraceful'[10], 'the most infamous'[11] and 'one of the worst military disasters in history'[12]. In reality it was a rout and President Truman declared a state of emergency. Legitimate questions about the wisdom, morality and legality of taking offensive action north of the 38th parallel were lost beneath a familiar wave of moral righteousness and misplaced confidence. Doubters were sidelined, sceptics labelled as appeasers and allies were either 'with us or against us'. Washington wrapped itself in an armour of certitude.

In a pattern that has since been repeated, the quest for UN authority to cross the 38th parallel was mired in unconvincing rationalisation, transparent ambiguity and diplomatic and legal machinations reminiscent of the wrangling over the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The British government agonised. Canada was troubled. India opposed. And Australia dared not disagree. Washington would not be deterred. A conflict that started with noble

intentions as a United Nations police action, transformed itself into an unnecessary war in which the principal antagonists became China and the United States. It did not have to be. And it only made things worse.

After the battle line settled around the 38th parallel, the profligate bombing campaign north of the border and the widespread use of napalm, flattened, burned and destroyed those who remained lived a troglodyte existence in caves and holes in the ground.

The architect of the bombing campaign was Curtis LeMay, head of Strategic Air Command. His commander-in-chief was President Truman. LeMay was the world's foremost practitioner of obliteration bombing. It has been said of him that the Luftwaffe's Hermann Göring and the Royal Air Force's 'Bomber' Harris 'weren't even in the same league'[16]. When LeMay reminisced on his achievements in Korea, he remarked with unflinching casualness that 'Over a period of three years or so, we killed off – what – twenty percent of the population of Korea as direct casualties of war, or from starvation or exposure?' He added that we 'eventually burned down every town in North Korea anyway, some way or another...'[17]

LeMay's attitude to civilian casualties was morally indefensible by any standard. 'There are no innocent civilians'[18] he said. 'It is their government and you are fighting a people, you are not trying to fight an armed force anymore. So it doesn't bother me so much to be killing the so-called innocent bystanders'[19]. By his own estimation 'we killed off over a million civilian Koreans and drove several million from their homes'[20]. LeMay conceded however that 'I suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal'[21]. He was probably right on the last point.

By the time the armistice was agreed in July 1953, civil society in North Korea was broken. Conventional explosives and napalm had achieved their intended effect. Not only were more bombs dropped on Korea than in the whole of the Pacific theatre during World War II – but more of what fell was napalm in both absolute and relative terms. The bombing campaign continued relentlessly for nearly three years after the invasion had been repulsed in September 1950. And it kept going for fifteen months when the only outstanding issue at the truce talks was the question of the release and repatriation of prisoners. John Foster Dulles liked to call it 'massive retaliation'[22]. Even when peace was in sight, Dulles had misgivings about letting up on the bombing campaign. He did not want an armistice 'until we have shown - before all Asia - our clear superiority'[23]. Now there is blowback.

Henry Kissinger said that if President Truman had been prepared to accept the status quo at the 38th parallel, 'he could say he had rebuffed communism in Asia… He could have shown a face of power to the world while teaching Americans the wisdom of constraint in using such power. He could have escaped terrible battlefield defeats, the panic and gloom that followed, and other grave difficulties'[24]. Kissinger's US-centric analysis is important but it is only part of the story. The consequences to the Korean people were far more tragic; the effect on the long-term stability of the peninsula far more serious; and the prospect for ongoing conflict

Bombing of Wonsan, North Korea, 1951. Photo: US Air Force

North Korea and instilled in its people a level of distrust and resentment that has shaped the country's continuing hostility toward the United States. In the re-built streets of Pyongyang, the legacy of bombing is bitterness. Most of North Korea was levelled – 'systematically bombed town by town'[13]. Cities and towns were razed, leaving a landscape pockmarked by piles of bricks and the foundations of buildings. MacArthur said in 1951 that 'The war in Korea has almost destroyed that nation. I have never seen such devastation…If you go on indefinitely, you are perpetuating a slaughter such as I have never heard of in the history of mankind'[14]. It only got worse. Dean Rusk said that the United States bombed 'everything that moved in North Korea, every brick standing on top of another'[15]. By late 1952 the population of Pyongyang was down to about 50,000 people from half a million before the war. The few officials who had not moved to safety at Kanggye in the north, operated from underground bunkers; many women and children had been sent to China; and

in northeast Asia more worrying. The failed war in Korea established the pattern for the next sixty years, and the world is reaping the consequences. The 'wisdom of constraint' remains elusive. One of the consequences is that we have entered a 'strange new world' where Americans 'are finding it harder than ever to impose their will on anyone, anywhere'.[25] As the bestselling writer, Alistair Horne, observed so wisely - 'How different world history would have been if MacArthur had had the good sense to stop on the 38th Parallel'[26].

US Army Col. Kurt Taylor briefs Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, left, and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, right, at the truce village of Panmunjom, in a demilitarized zone (DMZ) north of Seoul, South Korea, July 21, 2010, as a North Korean soldier watches through the window.

The legacy

It is now obvious that the Korean war was a watershed. The manner of the war's conduct, and the assumptions and attitudes that it generated in Washington, established a precedent that the United States has chosen to continue time and again - no more clearly demonstrated than by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's jarring statement that 'If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation'[27]. As one diplomatic historian noted somberly - 'Korea's legacy is practically incalculable…in terms of the cost of the arms race, the international isolation of China, and for the impact on American political development'[28]. Half a century after Korea, Gore Vidal described with exaggerated, yet biting and uncomfortable cynicism, the foreign policy trend that Washington has followed ever since – 'We honor no treaties. We spurn international courts. We strike unilaterally wherever we choose…we bomb, invade, subvert other states'[29].

The Korean war was the key that unlocked the riches of NSC-68; removed the post-war cap on military spending; restored and enlarged the American military apparatus after nearly five years of demobilization; and gave oxygen to the Truman Doctrine. And it defined the modern world in a way that pitted the United States against any movement wherever it saw a perceived threat to its strategic or economic interests or even its credibility. Then and now Washington had a fetish for credibility over proportionality. As for China, the ill-tempered Korean armistice served only to deepen and continue Washington's antagonism toward it. And as for North Korea, the seeds of its nuclear ambitions were probably sown a few years after the armistice when - in flagrant violation of the terms of the armistice - Washington introduced nuclear weapons onto the peninsula, despite the concerns of its allies and the unambiguous advice of the State Department.

No one can deny the validity of the initial decision to repel the North Korean invasion and restore peace and security at the 38th parallel; or that the ensuing three-month conflict was a just war. But the fateful decision in October 1950 to invade North Korea was driven by an ideological objective – to impose social, political and regime change. Like the slow-burning consequences of interventions in the Middle East, it has engendered a deeper and longer-lasting conflict; one that is exacerbated by the continuing festering presence of American troops on the peninsula, from which they have never left. It is not difficult to understand why there is still no peace treaty with China or North Korea. Nor is it difficult to understand why the Korean peninsula has become the world's most volatile crisis point.

The war left North Koreans with a permanent siege mentality, a defensive, embattled, ultra-nationalistic spirit and a self-image based on pride at having survived an encounter with the most technologically advanced power in the world. Despite the protestations of Secretary of State Tillerson that 'we do not seek an excuse to send our military north of the 38th parallel'[30], the country lives with a constant fear of invasion, subjugation and occupation. Pyongyang braces every spring when the United States and South Korea conduct their annual joint military exercise in the seas around the Korean peninsula. And the siege mentality is exacerbated by the menacing presence of American troops just below the 38th parallel and the almost

permanent deployment of naval ships and aircraft in the region. More threatening still is the United States' nuclear and missile arsenal. The Pyongyang regime knows – the whole world knows - that the United States has a stockpile of between 4,000 to 7,000 nuclear warheads; that over a thousand are actively deployed on ballistic missiles, submarines and at air bases; and that some are almost certainly targeted at Pyongyang.

In the face of such threats, North Korea regards its nuclear program as 'an important deterrent to external aggression and a security guarantee for the regime's survival'[31]. Nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles are its ultimate insurance. It will never surrender them in response to threats, coercion and sanctions. Pyongyang officials repeatedly state that nothing will stop their nuclear and missile development and that sanctions will not stop the process. There is every reason to believe them. They feel threatened and have done so for nearly seven decades. And their conviction and sense of threat are real. The war has not ended. There has been an armistice between military commanders not a peace treaty between states.

James Clapper, United States Director of National Intelligence from 2010-17, could not have been clearer. He warned that the notion of getting North Korea to give up its nuclear capability is a 'lost cause' and a 'non-starter'.[32] And General James F. Grant, a former director of intelligence for US Forces Korea, once explained that 'It [nuclear capacity] is their only current asset that makes them a serious player at the negotiating table. In their minds, it is the ultimate poison pill that will forestall military action against them…' In Grant's opinion, North Korea has four overall goals - 'regime and state survival and continuity, external respect and independence of action, controlling the nature and pace of internal change and the eventual peaceful unification of the Korean peninsula under terms acceptable to North Korea'.[33] Invasion of the South is not one of them. Nor is a first strike on the United States or its armed forces. Kim Jong-un is neither irrational nor suicidal.

The perception of American hypocrisy only strengthens Pyongyang's resolve. While Washington professes to desire a world without nuclear weapons and demands a denuclearized Korean peninsula, it will not abide by the same rules. In 1957, the United States unilaterally abrogated the armistice treaty by introducing nuclear weapons. In 2001, it withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia. And in 2016-17, it opposed – and lobbied its allies to oppose – the groundbreaking United Nations resolution for multilateral negotiations designed to achieve a worldwide nuclear ban treaty. North Korea's nuclear and missile capability is a response to the American military presence, not the cause of it. Paradoxically, Washington has reversed the logic, portraying Pyongyang's capability as the justification for its indefinite military posture in South Korea and its continuing wartime operational control of the South's armed forces.

Pyongyang wants engagement and respect; it wants regime security and state survival; it wants a peace treaty to end the 70-year war and remove the threat to its existence; and it wants a way forward with South Korea. Denuclearization is unlikely to occur without them. China's recent criticism was pointed. It counselled the United States that it was driving North Korea 'in the wrong direction', that it was 'only making things worse' and that its 'hostile policy is to blame for North Korea's weapons programs'.[34] China's recent joint proposal with Russia represents the way forward – a two track path toward both denuclearization and a peace mechanism. But Washington appears to want the former without recognizing the need for the latter. It is playing a losing hand. Sanctions will cause hardship but will not influence government policy. Nor will they precipitate the collapse of the regime. As the respected British journalist Simon Jenkins wrote recently the most effective sanction on North Korea is 'the sanction of prosperity'.[35]

To similar effect is Thomas L. Friedman, writing in the *New York Times*. He has proffered the solution that Washington seems unwilling to recognise. The United States should 'offer to recognize the legitimacy of the North Korean regime'; it should 'open an embassy in Pyongyang, engage in economic trade and aid'; and it should put 'a very clear peace offer to the North Koreans' that 'if you fully denuclearize and end your missile program, we will offer you full peace, full diplomacy, full engagement, economic aid, and an end to the Korean War.'[36] This is the only endgame.

ENDNOTES

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