

The background of korean peninsula crisis history essay



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CHAPTER 2

2. 1 Introduction

The Korean Peninsula with the issues of North Korea's nuclear remains one of the world's main concerns that pose a potential threat to regional security. [16]The relationship between the two Koreas has worsened considerably during the recent years due to lack of trust and confidence, as well as the contrasting ideas on reaching a solution on the nuclear issues. After the end of the Cold War, few attempt to change the situation in Korea and to end the confrontation failed, mainly because of mutual distrust and of lack of contacts among its people. A new round of cautious approaches has started after Kim Dae-jung became president of South Korea in 1998. The historical June 2000 summit meeting between the top leaders of the two Koreas has brought hopes for unification and a peace process. Since then, there is increasing official interaction, but still only limited and controlled contacts among the people of the two countries.

2. 2 Origin of the Unresolved Conflict

After being under the Japanese occupation for the last four decades, there was hope for the Korean people to regain their full sovereignty at the end of the World War II. In August 1945, Japan was forced to surrender after atomic bombs were dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The 'liberation' of the Korean Peninsula started by Soviet troops from the north and later by American troops from the south, with the 38th parallel line became the line of demarcation between the two allies. But instead of becoming a free and sovereign country, the Korean Peninsula was once

again put under pressure. This time, it was the upcoming rivalry between the Soviet Union and the U. S, which would shape Korea's history. Thus, Korea came to be divided into two temporary zones of occupation that, as the Cold War deepened, became two separate Korean regimes with opposed principles and sponsors.[17]

In 1948, the Korean Peninsula was divided into two sovereign states due to political infiltration from the two so-called liberators, that is, Soviet Union and the U. S, and the increasing radicalisation of Korean civil society and its leaders. The two Koreas, notably the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) or DPRK, started their new life in dependence of their military and political protectors, the U. S, the Soviet Union, China and in an atmosphere of the growing tensions between East and West.

When the U. S and Soviet withdrew their troops from Korea in 1949, South Korea wanted to “ restore the lost land” and DPRK wanted to “ liberate the southern half of the Republic.”[18]The economically and militarily stronger DPRK decided to solve the problem of non-recognition and of the division by military means. Its leader, Kim Il-sung went to Moscow in April 1950 to convince Stalin, and in May to China to obtain the approval of Mao. In Moscow, he could secure Stalin's support in return for political as well as some material gains for DPRK. At the beginning, Stalin was cautious and against the plan, but was convinced by Kim Il-sung that the war could be won quickly without U. S intervention.

As the DPRK troops launched a surprise attack against South Korea in the early morning of June 25, 1950, U. S President Henry S Truman responded quickly by sending troops from Japan to Korea and mobilised the UN to undertake its first-ever international military action. Unfortunately for DPRK, the Soviet Union was not present to veto during the UN Security Council session at that time. However, on the same day, the UN Security Council condemned the invasion and called for immediate ceasefire and withdrawal of the troops to the 38th parallel. When DPRK refused to withdraw from South Korea, the U. S decided to intervene in Korea, and on June 27, 1950, the Security Council called for members to support the U. S intervention.

2. 3 The Korean War

On 7 July 1950, the UN Security Council decided to establish a Unified Command for the UN Forces in Korea and mandated a joint military action to repel DPRK troops and to restore the status quo in Korea. The UN military action in Korea, taken by the U. S Eighth Army under General MacArthur, was able to accomplish its mission and the war could have ended by 7 October 1950. However, sensing an opportunity to roll back communist expansion and to unify the country by force, General MacArthur and South Korean President Rhee Syng-man, decided to march further into DPRK. They were confronted by unexpected enemy, the Chinese “volunteers” who had moved into DPRK in massive numbers. Together with North Korean troops, the Chinese started an offensive and pushed back UN forces to below the 38th parallel and recaptured Saigon in January 1951. The conflict had developed into a limited international war involving the U. S and nineteen other nations on one side and China and North Korea on the other.

As the military situation developed unfavourably for the Allied forces, General MacArthur asked Truman to authorize the use of nuclear weapons against China and DPRK. Fortunately, although some U. S military leaders favoured the nuclear option, Truman decided not to use the weapons for a number of reasons.[19]He discharged General MacArthur over this issue and redefined American policy by abandoning his objective of military reunification of Korea. His aim was now a return to the status quo, even as the Chinese and North Koreans were advancing southward. Truman was unwilling to engage in an all-out war which could have led to a world war involving the Soviet Union.

However, instead of no nuclear weapons were used, the U. S resorted to massive air bombings, including the use of napalm. It is quite obvious that not only its government but also the people of DPRK have no good memories of the U. S. Linking the U. S capability to use nuclear weapons in the Korean War and the present debate on the North Korean nuclear program, Michael J. Mazarr stated that:

The U. S thus exposed North Korea, during its infancy as a nation, to the fearsome power and enormous political value of nuclear weapons. The lesson was apparently not lost on North Korea's leaders, and early U. S nuclear threats are one important thread in the tapestry of the North's motives for a nuclear program.[20]

The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs showed to the world that conflicts in the 20th century could be decided within seconds.[21]This experience and the possibility that those weapons could decide a war again left a deep

impression on the DPRK regime and its population. Furthermore, the U. S foreign policy on the Korean Peninsula made it almost unnecessary for Pyongyang to spread the impression of a brutal and arrogant America: the behaviour of the U. S spoke for itself. Until today, the sorrows of the Korean War have a special meaning to the North Korean resentments against the U. S. With the American considerations about the use of nuclear force during the Korean War, the nuclear issue touched ground in this region for the first time.

As the war reached a new phase with massive intervention of Chinese “volunteers”, the UN General Assembly formally proposed a ceasefire in December 1950. The representatives of the UN and communist commands began formal truce negotiations in July 1951, but only in 1953, with the death of Stalin and with Dwight Eisenhower as the U. S President, did the bitter fighting come to an end, with heavy casualties on both sides. An armistice agreement between the UN forces, represented by the U. S, and China and DPRK was drawn up and signed. South Korea, however, wanting to unify the country with the help of the U. S, refused to sign the truce agreement.[22] Instead, a mutual defence treaty was signed with the U. S in October 1953 and an arrangement for the continued presence of U. S forces in South Korea. The subsequent Geneva Conference on Korea in April 1954 failed to find a political solution to the two Koreas issue. The failure of the two attempts to unify the peninsula only deepened the division, making any contact with each other impossible.

The Korean War began with the aim of reunification by military force, but ended with hundreds of thousands of deaths and a nearly totally devastated

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peninsula in July 1953. The development on the Korean Peninsula has gone through a lot of critical situations since the war ended. In succeeding years, the Cold War seemed to make it impossible for the two Koreas to start a policy of conciliation and to smooth the way for reunification.

2. 4 North Korea's Nuclear Program

Toward the end of the Cold War, South Korea became one of the major economic powers in the region while DPRK seemed to become totally isolated with political changes. The decline of the Soviet Union, the collapse of former ' brother-states' in Eastern Europe, and the reform process in China, left deep uncertainty in DPRK's leadership. Since the first indigenous North Korean reactor was detected in the early 1980s by U. S spy satellites, the attention of the world community has focused on the question of whether DPRK is using its nuclear facilities to produce military-grade nuclear material. The loss of important economic partnerships and natural disasters has brought Pyongyang into a position where the government was unable to provide food for its own population, it was quite logical that DPRK used the uncertainty of the world community about the status of its nuclear program to broaden its clearance in gaining economic support without losing political control over the country.

Indeed, since 1990 and the withdrawal of Soviet support, DPRK's economy has declined sharply, though according to South Korean reports, 1984 was the last time the country achieved economic self-efficiency.[23]A central tool in DPRK's efforts to maintain the communist regime has been the use of weapons development in order to gain concessions, aid and favourable

treaty outcomes with its prospective adversaries. At a glance DPRK's
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behaviour might seem to show that it is making threatening acts for no other reason than to disrupt the process of warming relations with South Korea, the U. S, and its other neighbours. However, re-examination shows a careful policy of developing a threatening system or capability, and using that threat to gain attention, and hopefully concessions from negotiating partners.

Figure: 1

North Korea's Nuclear Facilities

Source: Interactive Map of DPRK Nuclear Facilities (2002).[24]

DPRK first employed this policy over its nuclear power and weapons program in the early 1990s. An indigenous nuclear program had been underway since the 1970s, but it was only in 1992 that the UN nuclear monitoring body, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was allowed to inspect all DPRK's nuclear facilities as illustrated at Figures 1. After three inspections, the submitted data showed discrepancies which indicate that DPRK might have been concealing enough plutonium to build one or two nuclear weapons.

[25]After an abortive declaration of withdrawal from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), DPRK has agreed to give up its nuclear program with the condition that modern light-water reactors were supplied to fulfil its energy needs. After a period of crisis, war was averted when this formula was included in the Agreed Framework of October 1994 between the U. S and DPRK.[26]

The recent confrontation between the U. S and DPRK flared after the country was named as one of the three countries in the “ Axis of Evil” by President George W. Bush in his annual State of Union speech in January 2002. It

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seems probable now that this was the by-product of a speech intended to justify a war with Iraq.[27] However, when publicly labelled an 'evil' state by the world's only superpower, tensions apparently heightened within the DPRK regime. In any case, when James Kelly, U. S assistant secretary of state, confronted the North Koreans with evidence of a uranium enrichment program in October 2002, they admitted the existence of the program. DPRK then proceeded to remove seals on the reprocessing plant at Yongbyon, and declared its withdrawal from the NPT on January 10, 2003.[28]

2. 5 Summary

As discussed, the two Koreas were divided at the 38th parallel at the end of the Second World War. That line became the line of demarcation between the Soviet troops advancing from the north and the American troops coming from the south. It was the beginning of the rivalry between the two major world superpowers. Thus, Korea came to be divided into two temporary zones of occupation that, as the Cold War deepened, became the sites of two different regimes with different principles and ideologies.

The problem worsen with the North Korean invasion of South Korea which sparked the Korean War. The conflict had developed into a limited international war involving the U. S and nineteen other nations on one side and China and North Korea on the other. The war ended with the signing of an armistice between the U. S, representing the UN forces, and China and North Korea. South Korea refused to sign the truce agreement, but instead signed a mutual defence treaty with the U. S.

In the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union which means the withdrawal of Soviet support and the reform process of China, DPRK felt isolated. At the same time, with collapsing economy and widespread famine it had to survive by bolstering its conventional forces and embarking on nuclear program. This was also because DPRK wants respect and security guarantee. Further, DPRK develops nuclear weapons out of fear and to attain a more positive deal in negotiations. That is the more positive view; alternatively, the North Koreans simply see the nuclear program and the bomb as their right and a necessity.