

Understanding the Korean Crisis Requires a Knowledge of History

한반도 위기를 이해하려면 먼저 역사적 과정을 이해해야 한다

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I. Introduction

Sociologists and Psychologists have developed the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy. By this it is meant that a person or group make a definitive statement about a state of affairs, and then act in such a way as to ensure that the predicted outcome occurs. That result is then paraded as confirmation that the original prophecy was correct. The recent history of Korea, at least since the 19th century reaffirms the validity of this hypothesis time and time again.

Korea's history did not of course begin in the 19th century. A distinctive Korean culture and language can be traced back at least 1000 years. For all but the past 72 years it was a unitary State. Left to its own devices Korea was perfectly capable of thriving and meeting the needs of its people. Modern history however, is replete with examples of the ability of larger, more powerful nations, to interfere. That interference is invariably in their interests rather than the interests of the subject nation.

Korea even managed to co-exist in relative peace and prosperity with its giant neighbour China, and Chinese Confucianism is still an influential component of Korean culture. It is true that Korea was required to pay tribute to Chinese emperors, but this was a relatively benign price to pay. In more recent times China had

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effectively underwritten Korea's independence. That relationship, especially between what is now known as North Korea and China, has assumed even more crucial dimensions in the face of outside interference.

It is apparent from public statements made by foreign, especially western, political leaders, that they do not understand or even know about the relevant history, much less the subtle and complex nuances of Korean's relationship with its neighbours. Such an understanding is the sine qua non of effectively dealing with the current crisis over North Korea's nuclear weapons.

II. A Brief History of Foreign Intervention 1592–1945.

Japan invaded Korea in 1592 with an army of more than 250,000 soldiers. This was the first of a series of invasions by Japan that brought untold horror and misery to the Korean people.

The Opium War between the UK and China from 1839–42 caused the Koreans to draw their borders even tighter. That did not stop the colonial powers from attempting a forceful opening. The first US venture was the SS General Sherman which was sent to Korea in August 1866 to “persuade” the Koreans of the benefits of western imperialism.

This occurred not many years after the US Commodore Perry had conducted a similar ‘opening of the borders’ exercise with Japan. The SS Sherman became stranded in a river and was then attacked by the Koreans who massacred the crew.

Five years later in 1871 the Americans returned to seek their revenge and a contingent of Marines stormed the Korean forts, imposing heavy casualties. They then withdrew, claiming a ‘victory’, a pattern that was later to be repeated elsewhere in East Asia.

The Japanese then returned in February 1876, this time imposing an unequal treaty upon the Koreans. It was the beginning of a long period of national disaster for the Koreans who were gradually subsumed into the Japanese Empire, formally becoming part of the Empire in 1910. The Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905 had made Korea a “protectorate” of Japan. Even earlier, in 1894 another Japanese invasion had captured the Korean king and installed a puppet regime.

Koreans were forced to adopt Japanese names. They were used as virtual slave labour and hundreds of thousands of Koreans were taken to Japan and used there as forced labour. They were still there when the US atomic bombs were dropped in 1945. At least 20% of the casualties in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were in fact Korean forced labourers.

Other Koreans became collaborators with the Japanese and enjoyed a relatively privileged position, such collaboration extending after Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, beginning a long war with China, which lasted 14 years. Of particular significance however, was that hundreds of thousands of Koreans fought with the Chinese against Japan. Included in their number was Kim il Sung who later parlayed his war hero status into becoming the first postwar leader of North Korea.

There is little or no recognition in the West of that long China-Japan War. Western histories tend to focus on the relatively brief US involvement in the Asia-Pacific theatre from December 1941 (Pearl Harbor) to August 1945 (the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki).

The same was true of the European theatre. Russia lost about 27 million fighting the Germans, losing more at the Battle of Stalingrad alone than the entire western allied casualties combined for the entire war. Accurate numbers are harder to come by in the China-Japan War, but estimates of Chinese killed range up to more than 20 million.

The significance of this scale of slaughter in both Russia and China is twofold. The first is that these huge losses are downplayed in the West. Successive generations of western children are raised on a constant diet of the Battle of Britain; fighting Rommel in the North African desert; the D-Day landings; the Battle of Iwo Jima and so on. These were essentially sideshows.

Russia and China were the main reasons the Axis powers were defeated. It is part of the innate racism of western colonialism to fail to acknowledge that non-western nations, including Russia, China and Korea fought with great bravery and at huge human cost to defeat the enemy. This mindset has carried over into the post World War 2 period discussed below, and is a major factor in creating the conditions that have led to the present dangerous impasse.

The second consequence of significance I suggest is the experiences of China and Korea with the western powers up to 1945 did nothing to create a fabric

of mutual trust and respect. What was to happen after World War 2 only served to reinforce the distrust.

III. The Period 1945–1953.

As noted above, Korea had been a singular entity for a thousand years prior to 1945. This changed in the dying stages of World War 2. The day after the Nagasaki bomb was dropped, John McCloy, then US Assistant Secretary for War, asked Dean Rusk (later to become US Secretary of State under President's Kennedy and Johnson) to devise a boundary dividing North from South Korea.

It is difficult to overstate the hubris that is explicit in McCloy's request, and equally that Rusk could choose the 38th parallel of latitude without consulting any Korean official or anyone else who may have had an interest in post war Korea.

If there is a single act that could be pinpointed as creating conditions guaranteed to foment ongoing difficulties it would have to be this one. There are of course recognizable similarities with the 1954 Geneva Accords that divided post-colonial Vietnam at the 17th parallel. There, the plan was to have an election within two years leading to a national government of unity.

That agreement was sabotaged by the Americans who refused to allow the elections to take place, in part because the “wrong man” Ho Chi Minh, would undoubtedly have won.

A similar exercise occurred in Korea. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops from the North in 1946. The Japanese had been defeated, which was their main objective, and there was no desire to maintain control over even part of Korea.

In the south however, the Americans had different ideas. Nationalist group vying to take control were brutally suppressed. As Su-kyoung Hwang documents in her invaluable study “Korea's Grievous War” (2016) there were a number of insurrections against the military government installed in the US zone by General John Hodge.

The suppression relied upon some former Japanese occupiers, who were maintained by the Americans in Korea until January 1946 when popular disgust forced their removal; former Japanese collaborators; and anti-communist militants who had

crossed over from the north. Tens of thousands of Koreans were killed in these suppressions.

Bruce Cumings in his research (*The Origins of the Korean War*; 1981) argues that between 100,000 and 200,000 people died as a result of political violence in the south, before the outbreak of war in June 1950. They died at the hands of South Korean government forces, or those of the US Occupation Army.

There were also excursions across the border by both sides, and again there were tens of thousands of casualties inflicted. Syngman Rhee, who had lived in the US for the previous 40 years, was installed as a US puppet dictator on 15 August 1948. Three weeks later on 9 September 1948 Kim il Sung proclaimed the State of North Korea with himself as leader.

With that post-war history it was less than surprising that a full-scale civil war broke out on 25 June 1950. To describe it as an attack by the North seeking to conquer the south, as it is almost invariably portrayed in the west, is to oversimplify the complex and fluid situation that prevailed in the 1945-50 period. In particular, such western emphases tend to gloss over the political events in the south that made a peaceful reunification impossible.

The details of the war itself have been exhaustively traversed elsewhere. It is sufficient for present purposes to make only some brief points. The North's incursion was initially very successful, occupying Seoul in short time.

The US obtained the consent of the Security Council to form a coalition to oppose the North. This was only achieved because of the absence of the Soviet Union from the Council. They were boycotting its proceedings because of the refusal to recognise the Peoples Republic of China as the legitimate Chinese representative on the Council. That manifest absurdity continued until 1972.

The UN American led "coalition" quickly recaptured Seoul on 25 September, and on 1 October 1950 crossed the 38th parallel. They quickly pushed on to the Yalu River border with the PRC, at which point the Chinese entered the war and quickly pushed the Americans out of North Korea.

The Americans were astonished by this military setback. The UN Commander, General McArthur wanted 50 atomic bombs to use against the Chinese. He was fired by President Truman, but that the US military would even contemplate the use of atomic weapons is itself very revealing.

The war dragged on until the armistice in 1953. The Americans used their control of the skies to devastate the North through bombing and napalm. More bombs were dropped on North Korea than had been used against Japan and Germany combined during World War 2.

Military targets were rapidly exhausted and thereafter the bombing was used as a weapon of terror against the civilian population. That was undoubtedly a war crime under Protocol 1 of the Geneva Conventions. Those familiar with the US war machine's activities since 1945 will not be surprised by that. Nor will they be surprised by the fact that at least 1 in 5 and possibly as high as 1 in 3 North Koreans were killed. The UK's losses for the entirety of World War 2 by comparison were less than 1% of its population, and the US one third of 1%.

It will equally come as no surprise that the US has not ratified Protocol 1, along with Israel and a literal handful of other States. 174 States have ratified the Protocol.

IV. The Post Korean War Period.

The history of the South is important in this period when put against the rhetoric emanating from the Americans, particularly claims about democracy, the rule of law, and how their version of a political system is superior to that of the North. For example section 13(d) of the armistice agreement specified that no new weapons other than replacements would be allowed on the Korean peninsula. Notwithstanding this prohibition the United States had nuclear weapons at their disposal in South Korea from 1958 to 1991. It wanted to reinstall them in 2013 but the South Korean government to its credit refused to allow that. South Korea signed the non-proliferation treaty in 1975 (North Korea in 1985). We now know however that between 1982 and 2000 South Korea was consistently in violation of its obligations under the non-proliferation treaty. The government of Syngman Rhee was no less brutal or oppressive than that of Kim. Rhee was finally hustled out of Seoul by the Americans just ahead of the arrival of an angry mob at the presidential palace. Park Chung-Hee who was also a dictator and a former Japanese collaborator succeeded Rhee. He formed the Korean CIA, which operated in a

manner influenced by the Gestapo in the 1932 - 45 period in Germany. Park re-wrote the Korean constitution in October 1972 to give himself supreme power. He remained in office for 16 years before being assassinated by his chief of intelligence in 1979. Park's demise was followed by a military coup one week later. In 1987 a new republic was formed and a former member of the military junta Roh Tae-woo became president. In 2013 Park Geun-hye became president. She is the daughter of the former dictator President Park. She in turn was forced out in March 2017 after being convicted of malfeasance in public office. South Korea now has a new president, Mr Moon, a man who for the first time in South Korea's post-World War II history shows genuine signs of a willingness to negotiate with North Korea and other interested parties, and to reach a peaceful resolution of the problems.

V. North Korea's Nuclear Program

Given this troubled history, and in particular the virulent hostility towards the North shown by the Americans in particular, it is hardly surprising that the North's Government should take steps to secure its borders and territorial integrity. The North Korean government is as capable as anybody else of reading the geopolitical tealeaves. They would have observed for example the fate of Iraq's Saddam Hussein who made the fatal mistake of believing American assurances of non-intervention in his dispute with Kuwait in 1990. There followed a decade of sanctions during which at least half a million Iraqi civilians died. That was followed by an American led invasion on the wholly false pretext of the Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction. More than 1 million Iraqis have since died it as a direct consequence of that invasion and subsequent occupation. Fourteen years later Iraq is still occupied, its cities destroyed, and fighting an insurgency against Islamic radicals. They would also have observed the fate of Muammar Gadhafi who renounced the use and possession of weapons of mass destruction. That was insufficient to save him from an American led invasion, which similarly has left Libya as a dysfunctional state. It had previously enjoyed the highest standard of living in Africa. It was precisely because neither Iraq nor Libya possessed weapons of mass destruction that

they were attacked. It was a lesson not lost upon the North Korea leadership. North Korea's program of developing a nuclear weapon's capability and the means of delivering it has led to a long saga of negotiations, agreements reached and regularly broken, and a varying commitment by successive US presidents to manage the inevitable consequences in a rational manner. This long history has been ably analysed by Fu Ying in a Brookings Institute strategy paper published in May 2017 (The Korean Nuclear Issue). It is sufficient for present purposes to note that where agreements between the interested parties have been reached, they have invariably been undermined by the actions of either the Americans or the North Koreans or both. The current situation is that the United States is engaged on a regular basis with large-scale military exercises on or about the North Korean borders. These exercises are accompanied by offensive and inflammatory rhetoric that is unprecedented in recent history. These threats and military exercises have been accompanied by sanctions that are unprecedented in the scope and effect. A neutral observer of Korean history would readily come to the conclusion that threats and sanctions against the North are counter-productive. The North Korean response to these threats and provocations has been to accelerate its nuclear weapons development program. It now has the apparent capacity to deliver a nuclear warhead to the United States mainland. The destructive power of the nuclear warheads is significantly greater than that which devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As a country which has essentially escaped the devastation that war can cause within its borders, the psychological consequences of a nuclear attack upon an American mainland target is likely to be traumatic and beyond the comprehension of the average American. It seems highly improbable that North Korea will capitulate to American threats. As long as they continue with their nuclear program and the Americans do not moderate both their language and their behaviour then the chances of the situation escalating to that point where nuclear weapons are used increases exponentially. Both the Russian and Chinese governments have indicated that should the United States or one of its allies attack North Korea then they will come to the aid of North Korea. Such a development is frankly unthinkable, as a nuclear war between those great powers would leave nothing survivable. It is equally clear therefore that if it is to be a successful resolution of the North Korean issue then it has to be a negotiated one. The framework in the form of the now suspended Six Party Talks

already exists. Their resumption should be treated as a matter of priority. The Chinese and Russian governments have also proposed a double freeze, by which they are suggesting that the North Koreans suspend the nuclear and missile testing program and that the Americans and their allies cease military exercises directed against North Korea, and similarly cease making provocative and unhelpful remarks about North Korea and its government. Thus far the Americans have failed to respond positively to what seems to be an eminently reasonable proposal. They need to rethink their position. If a satisfactory compromise cannot be reached then the world as we know it is imperiled.