

The Korean War after Fifty Years

Challenges for Peace and Prosperity

George H. Quester
University of Maryland

The Korean War, as a model for the possibilities of limited war which hovered in the background for the entire Cold War, has inevitably drawn conflicting interpretations. Now that the Cold War is over, now that a half-century has passed since the Korean War, we ought to be able to sort and evaluate these interpretations.

We will begin with some general issues of interpretation, and then turn to some stages in time when greater optimism or pessimism seemed to take hold.

Some General Possibilities

First, some analysts would stress that the United States, in statements by Secretary of State Dean Acheson and General Douglas MacArthur and others, did not adequately warn Joseph Stalin and his Communist allies beforehand that the United States would defend South Korea if it were attacked. One could indeed extrapolate a broader lesson from this that Americans are generally not good about advertising their intentions here, with Saddam Hussein in his invasion of Kuwait, and the Soviets in their invasion of Afghanistan, also discovering that Americans react more strongly to such aggressions than they show in advance. The Japanese in 1941 similarly under-rated the American willingness to fight World War II out to a close; one would hope that any Beijing leaders contemplating an armed attack on Taiwan have noticed these prior examples.

Second, some analysts of military strategy would have seen the Korean War as what could have been predicted once Stalin's Soviet Union had its own nuclear weapons, i.e. that Communist tanks would

now be free to roll forward, by the theories of limited war, by the warnings that had already been articulated by Paul Nitze's staff in NSC-68, as the United States could not retaliate with nuclear weapons when Moscow now had such weapons, and when Moscow had not yet used them.

Third, most of us would have seen the war as the necessary standing up to Communism and its advance by military aggression. As Communist rule had been imposed, by brute force of one kind or another, on the unwilling populations of Eastern Europe, the analogies had emerged with the earlier advance of Fascist rule, and with the need to resist such advances, by threat of force, by actual force where the simple threat had not sufficed to deter aggression.

The War's End: 1953

Turning now to the trend of impressions over time, Americans have also had more than one way of interpreting the outcome of the Korean War, as it was negotiated to a halt in 1953.

Most important of all, Communism's advance was reversed and halted on the Korean peninsula, as Seoul changed hands four times, as the Republic of Korea was freed to achieve all that it was to accomplish in the south in the following half-century.

Related to this, it could be argued that a successful defense, by American blood sacrifice, locked in commitments that would not have been in place otherwise. Just as America had to defend West Berlin, once it had made an issue of its protection in the 1948 Berlin Airlift, and just as America could never tolerate Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba after President Kennedy stood up to Khrushchev in the 1962 missile crisis, Americans would find it much harder to withdraw from Korea after the casualties suffered in the Korean War.

But a third legacy of the war's ending was less fortunate, as the final truce line, seemingly determined by the bloody battlefield stalemate, left the DMZ much too close to Seoul. American Professors often have a longer commute to the campuses on which they teach than the drive from the truce line to the center of Seoul, the capital of the Republic of Korea. The American generals who wished to push the line further northward in 1953 were overruled by higher American authority, simply because of the human cost that would be involved.

The final memory of 1953 was more generally pessimistic for the future of containment, as Americans had demonstrated a sense of frustration with limited wars fought on the Asian continent, with a war which had see-sawed from prospects of the loss of all Korea to the prospect of a unification of Korea under non-Communist rule, and then back and forth again. The collective memory was thus one of

disappointment and casualties, of frustration and futility.

The Fall of Saigon: 1975

If one were pessimistic about the lessons and achievement of the 1950-53 Korean War, an even deeper pessimism might then have loomed when South Vietnam fell to Communist rule in 1975, after a guerrilla war that turned into a tank war at the end, after a guerrilla war in which the Republic Korea had sent troops to assist in the defense of South Vietnam. Many leftists around the world, and especially on American campuses, drew analogies here between South Vietnam and South Korea, asserting that each were artificial regimes serving American interests, asserting a wave of the future by which what had happened in Saigon would soon enough happen also in Seoul. As a sign of how pervasive this impression was among the member nations of the UN, there were meetings of the "non-aligned" nations "Group of 77" in 1975 to which Pyongyang was invited to send a representative, but Seoul was not.

There were at least three strands of argument by which the Communist world was expected to advance across Asia in the middle 1970s in a chain of following dominoes. Many people now saw Communism as more appropriate to the real needs of ordinary Asians than anything democracy had to offer; ideologically, they saw Communism as what the poor peasant wanted. Second, leaving aside ideology, anyone understanding basic geopolitics would have expected the Communist side to have the military advantage now, with its control over the center of the Eurasian land-mass, with the west having a difficult time defending all the promontories; Mackinder had long ago foreseen the difficulty here, when it was the British who had to worry about the plans of the Czar, rather than the United States having to worry about Moscow's plans. And third, in a simple contest of wills, a simple matching of resolve, the United States had quit the Vietnam contest, as military-age students and others crowded into Washington chanting "Hell no, we won't go."

Symptomatic of the seeming erosion of American commitments, the seeming erasure of the beneficial lessons of the Korean War, were statements of Jimmy Carter during his 1976 campaign for office, to the effect that American nuclear weapons, and American ground forces as well, might be withdrawn from Korea.

But the same nuclear weapons which had given the USSR a counter-deterrent to the U.S. after 1949, and which had thus made "limited war" the norm for Cold War conflict thereafter, could be used for other purposes, could be used as a form of deterrent reinsurance by a state whose very existence was in danger. It was thus hardly so

surprising that both the Republic of Korea and the Republic of China on Taiwan moved closer to a de facto nuclear weapons capability in these years, prodding an application of American influence to head off the plutonium reprocessing efforts involved here, prodding the United States to reconsider somewhat its erosion of commitments.

Pleasant Surprise Post-1975

The pessimistic picture drawn at the time of the fall of Saigon was not to be realized. Rather than strings of new violent conflicts leading to new Communist regimes in a chain of falling dominoes, the East Asian region has been remarkably free of war since 1975, and a variety of explanations again are to be found for this.

Someone focusing mainly on the factors of power politics would point to Communist China in effect switching sides toward the end of the Vietnam War. In a classic balance-of-power strategy, by which one always supports the weaker against the stronger, to head off a possible "hegemon," Beijing had apparently decided that Moscow was getting too strong, and Washington too weak. The visits of Kissinger and Nixon to Beijing were widely interpreted as a simple reshuffling of alliances, one any "realist" political scientist might have anticipated.

Apart from this, the United States appeared to get a second wind of resolve, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1978; the election of Ronald Reagan as President in 1980 seemed to show that Americans were once again willing to invest resources, and risk armed conflict, as part of standing up to the advance of Communism.

Third, and perhaps the very most important, and most relevant to the Korean case, the western system of economic and political freedom now was seen to have proved itself, delivering economic growth in East Asia such as the world had never seen before, delivering benefits to peasants that contradicted the ideological assumptions of leftists on American campuses or anywhere else.

Communist China's opening to the west, and its very enthusiastic opening of relations with the Republic of Korea, surely then reflected a little more than simple power politics. As China, under Deng Xiaoping, now abandoned Marxist solutions for its own economic growth, it heard Deng calling specifically for a Chinese imitation of the four East Asian "tigers" or "dragons": Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, — and South Korea. In the time that had been won in the prolonged but unsuccessful Vietnam War, and in the time and space that had been won in the frustrating and stalemated defense of South Korea in the Korean War, the advantages of market methods and an open society had become evident, so that the appeal of Communist guerrilla insurgency was never to be what had been projected.

If nuclear weapons had once been an important option for Seoul or Taipei, they faded in significance in the 1980s, as Taiwan and South Korea became major trading partners for the entire world, and indeed even with Communist China and Communist Vietnam. Ironically, it would be North Korea that in the 1990s became the outcast "pariah state," rather than South Korea. Yet it has to be remembered that the strategic significance of such weapons, as a deterrent to any foreign dreams of a conventional military takeover, might work as well for bad regimes as for good, i.e. might be as attractive for North Korea in the future, as for Israel or Taiwan or South Korea in the past. And, if either of the Koreas were ever to acquire nuclear weapons, one might not still be able to count on Japanese aversions to nuclear proliferation.

Today's Assessment

In light of the experience of the Korean War some fifty years ago, how do Americans see Korea today? Those of us who still worry about the intentions of the Pyongyang regime, or who wish that this regime could be eliminated as soon as possible, are typically accused of "Cold War thinking"; and one might indeed accept this label, as a compliment, as a sign that the Cold War indeed was about the most basic of human values.

Anyone comparing the two Koreas will sense that we have here the most perfect scientific test of two ideologies, of two approaches to the solving of human problems, as we have the same basic culture and the same basic distribution of natural resources on the two sides of the demarcation line, but such a vastly different degree of success. In other comparisons of the social systems, for example between the United States and the Soviet Union, one could blame the Soviet shortfall on the historic poverty of Russia, the weakness of the educational system under the Czar, etc. The same would hold for a comparison between democratic Belgium and Communist Romania, and for many other comparisons, where one could not "control for" the cultural and historical differences, when one was trying to test the two social approaches.

A more persuasively "fair test", "controlling for" other factors, might compare Cuba and Puerto Rico, or Taiwan and mainland China (although the sheer magnitude of the mainland's population and underdeveloped western provinces again skews the comparison). Like Puerto Rico vs. Cuba, the comparison of the two Koreas seems like a much more direct test of the impact of Communism.

The Republic of Korea is today amazingly more prosperous than it was in 1950, and it is genuinely democratic, demonstrating that politically and economically-free approaches can indeed work well in

a traditionally Asian context. Americans have reason to see South Korea as proving the value of the political and economic systems that work within the United States as well. The American model is available for adoption by anyone in the world, and a great number of countries are indeed adopting it, not because the United States government presses them to, but because it is so obvious that the model works. Americans thus have more reason today than in 1950 to identify with South Korea, because so much that was merely potentially possible then has now been realized.

But Americans, upon reflection, would have another more special reason to identify with South Korea, for there has been a great deal of much more direct American influence in the progress that South Korea has made, for a longer time through the work of American missionaries, since 1950 by the presence of the American servicemen stationed in Korea. By the example of their lifestyle, and by the radio and television signals that have leaked out over the airwaves, the nearness of the American soldiers (while often irritating, as is always the way with soldiers deployed abroad from any country) has worked to spread knowledge of the English language, and to spread an understanding of the processes of political democracy.

One index of this comes in the number of Koreans who have migrated to the United States. Related to this, another index is in the number of Koreans who have converted to one variety or another of Christianity, with South Korea by some measures being counted now as having a Christian majority, with the Republic of Korea now having a larger number of Presbyterians than the United States.

By comparison, North Korea, with its horrific Stalinist style of Communist rule, made even more bizarre by a practice of passing leadership from father to son by inheritance, and with its past record of launching terrorist attacks and submarine landings, strikes most Americans as every bit as bad as the enemy that had been fought in 1950, and perhaps all the worse because any moderating Russian influence of 1945 to 1990 is no longer in place. The comparison is then made all the more tragic by the news that famine continually threatens North Korea, with most people told to make do on two meals a day, when South Korea, just across the DMZ, has no problem in feeding its population.

When one considers the direct and indirect influences of the presence of American troops since 1950, it is interesting to think back to the news in 1958 that the Chinese Communist troops which had come to Kim Il-sung's rescue in 1950 were being withdrawn back to China. At the time, this seemed like good news, as perhaps a step toward ending the hostility that set the two sides against each other.

Today, one almost wishes that the Chinese PLA troops had remained there, because this might have made it easier for the Chinese to persuade the North Koreans to move away from doctrinaire Marxist models, because this might have served to restrain some of the more irresponsible ventures and initiatives taken by Kim Il-sung's regime.

Communist China today is the only friend that North Korea has. But Communist China is much more interested in cultivating its linkages with South Korea, for it is from the Republic of Korea that Beijing expects to be able to learn, and not from the Pyongyang regime.

Beijing can learn from Seoul on how to make money, how to make economic progress. It can also learn, just as it can learn from Taiwan, how an Asian society culturally governed by the Confucian ethic can handle the processes of free elections. When one sees how eager young Chinese in Beijing are to visit Seoul, and how reluctant they would be to have to visit Pyongyang instead, one sees how attractive a model the Republic of Korea has become. *

Lee Kwan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, has been eloquent and articulate in arguing that Asian societies are so different from those of the west that "American-style democracy" could not work in the Far East. Very articulate in arguing the other side, arguing that human beings everywhere have the same desire to have a choice in who governs them, and a desire to be free from arbitrary arrest and torture, has been the man elected President in the Republic of Korea, Kim Dae-jung.

One should never under-rate the importance of culture, and the power of the Confucian ethic in particular. But one can easily over-rate the "clash of civilizations" forecast by Samuel Huntington. Historically, the Americans driven by the "Protestant ethic" have found a great deal to admire in the "Confucian ethic". Like the Republic of China on Taiwan, the Republic of Korea has offered a nice demonstration that economic progress and hard work can go hand in hand with a functioning democracy.

The Continuing Question of Reunification

Ever since the Berlin Wall came down and West Germany absorbed East Germany, we have seen an interesting debate about whether the Koreans in the south have been increased or decreased in their desire to reunite with the North. The high economic costs encountered by the German Federal Republic, in undoing the damage of decades of Communist rule in the East, are argued to have made South Koreans wary of the similar burdens they would encounter if they had to undo the damage inflicted by all the years of Communist rule north of the 38th parallel. South Korea does not dominate North Korea in

population size or geographic area in the way that West Germany dominated East Germany. On a per-capita basis, it dominates North Korea much more, which of course would mean tremendous sacrifices of material wealth, if and when South Korea had to pull its Northern cousins up to some joint national average.

Since North Korea has been a far more totalitarian Communist state than was East Germany, the chances of winning freedom for the north have looked more remote. And, before the pleasantly surprising events of 1989, with the sudden collapse of the Berlin Wall, the chances of East Germany being freed of Communist rule had also looked remote.

Yet, in the years before 1989, one often also saw analyses of West German opinion suggesting that the hope had been given up of a German reunification, that West Germans were no longer interested in winning freedom for their East German cousins. All this turned out to be very misleading, of course, after the Berlin Wall came down. And this should suggest that we be cautious now about assuming that South Koreans would be so uninterested in winning a reunification with the North, if the opportunity should arise.

When something very desirable is out of reach, one avoids frustration by turning one's thoughts elsewhere, and this may hold for today's South Koreans just as it held for West Germans in the 1980s. To be sure, the price that West Germany had to pay for unification is a cautionary note for Koreans, but this is not by itself any decisive indication that they would want to avoid a freeing up of North Korea if this could be attained.

How a liberation of the north is to be achieved remains a most difficult question, with Americans being well-advised to take the judgments and advice of South Koreans into account, on how best to move ahead with this. But there should be much less doubt or uncertainty that such a unification of Korea, on the Seoul pattern rather than that of Pyongyang, remains very much to be desired.

One Final Overall Perspective

When weighing the overall significance of the Korean War, we might turn at the end to another kind of argument sometimes heard since 1990, by which the entire Cold War was a mistake and a waste of effort, by which all the risks of war and nuclear escalation that were run in the preparations for the defense of NATO, and in the general worldwide effort of containment, were unnecessary.

Communist China is now rapidly moving away from all the economic aspects of Communism. The unified Communist Vietnam has seen a similar move to abandon the teachings of Marx; instead of making Saigon resemble Hanoi, we now see Hanoi coming to resemble

Saigon, as market methods are introduced, as small independent shops spring up everywhere.

Wouldn't a unified Communist Korea under Kim Il-sung thus have made the same accommodation to reality, after an interim, saving everyone the price of the Korean War? Wouldn't a unified Communist Europe under Stalin also have given up on the Marxist-Leninist approach to economic decision-making?

There are at least two answers to this kind of false optimism, by which it was never necessary to contain Communism, by which it would not have been necessary to resist the North Korean invasion of 1950, and to mount a NATO defense/deterrence line for the next forty years.

First, there is no guarantee that Communist rulers, if they could keep expanding their domain, keep harvesting the economic accomplishments of others, would have seen the error of their Marxist assumptions about how an economy works; there is no guarantee that the Soviet economy would have collapsed as it did in the 1980s, if it had in the meantime been able to absorb the economy of West Germany and Japan, etc.

Second, the sheer magnitude of the South Korean post-1953 accomplishment, in economic, political and social terms, shows that a failure to resist would have been a tremendous waste of human opportunity, even if Kim Il-sung and his successors would have sooner or later seen the light.

The Republic of Korea, by its accomplishments after 1953, has showed the world that the Korean War was worth fighting, and that it was worth the risks and effort to contain the spread of Communism elsewhere around the world. The North Korean regime has since 1953 instead showed what needed so much to be avoided, showed what ideologically doctrinaire Communist tyranny could impose on a people.

The achievement of successfully defending the South may not have been so immediately clear to Americans and the world in 1953, or even in 1975. But it certainly should be clear today.