

*Korea's*  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY ODYSSEY

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*In Memory of James B. Palais*

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leaders, capitalists, former landlords, officials of the old colonial government, and people with relatives in the South.

The training and expansion of an army was a priority. Kim Il Sung himself had emerged from guerrilla origins, and many among the select group that dominated the government were military men. The greatest advantage the North had in creating its army, however, was the significant participation of Koreans in the then-raging Chinese Civil War. Return of experienced troops from that conflict gave the North a tremendous advantage in building its military compared with the South. Korean units, including Kim Il Sung's guerrillas, had worked with the Chinese Communists in north China and Manchuria all during World War II. And some Korean Communists were closely associated with the highest levels of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Perhaps as many as 100,000 Koreans, both Manchurian Korean residents and North Koreans, fought with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the civil war. In 1947 Kim Il Sung sent large units to Manchuria at a critical point in the war, thus earning Chinese gratitude that would be repaid a thousand times over during the Korean War. After 1948 Korean units began trickling back to the North and with the Chinese Communist victory over the Chinese Nationalists in 1949, larger units returned as a whole. By the spring of 1950, not only did North Korea have an army, but its army was also battle-trained and tested. With the addition of modern equipment and heavy armor, it would become a formidable force.

### The Korean War

For much of the post-World War II period, if people in the West knew anything at all about Korea, it was in relation to the Korean War. But any understanding of the origins of the war remained obscure, not to mention any knowledge about the country in which it was fought. It was the first of what became wars of stalemate or "limited wars" during the Cold War period—limited by necessity, given the catastrophic consequences of any broader conflict between the world's two nuclear powers. In fact, as far as we know the last serious discussion about using the atom bomb as adjunct to "conventional" warfare took place on the American side during the Korean War.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the Korean War began the refinement of the euphemisms we now commonly use to obscure the reality of modern war and the effects of the terrible weapons developed in this the most warlike century in human history. The Korean War was a "police action" or a "conflict" in American news accounts. The Korean War witnessed the first extensive use of jet aircraft, mass use of napalm, and brought concepts like "wind chill, brainwashing, and surgical bombing" into our vocabulary. A total of 33,625 Americans, hundreds of thousands of Chinese and Korean (North and South) soldiers, and millions of civilians died in this brutal "police action."<sup>6</sup> Yet if asked to compare the Vietnam and Korean wars, few Americans nowadays would have the slightest sense of just how big a war it was

This memory gap is stranger still, considering that the general contours of East Asian security arrangements today are still predicated on the inconclusive truce that ended the conflict in 1953 and drew a hard line between the two Koreas.

The war began with a massive North Korean assault over the 38th parallel in the early dawn hours of June 25, 1950. For years a debate has raged as to who started the fighting. Some insist the invasion was premeditated and directed by the Soviet Union, another of Stalin's maneuvers to expand the socialist world. Others point more accurately to a more supportive role played by the Soviets, with Kim Il Sung taking the lead after gaining the half-hearted blessings of the Chinese and the Soviets, as well as tanks and heavy guns, in the winter and spring of 1950. There is also a conspiracy theory that insists that Syngman Rhee provoked the North Korean attack under preparation in May 1950 in order to force the United States into a larger war that would end in the conquest of the North. Whatever the precipitating event, it emerged out of the very tense military standoff along the 38th parallel that had grown into a border war of position during most of the nine months preceding the invasion. Both sides had placed their troops in defensive positions along the border; both sides had initiated attacks to refine their military advantage along the artificial line of division. And both sides had contingency plans for a larger conflict. Whatever the final conclusion about who started the war after all the archives are opened, the fact remains that the North had gained Russian material support in the form of tanks, guns, and advice and grudging Chinese acquiescence by May 1950. Their preparations completed, they pushed ahead with an all-out attack (whether provoked or by design) on June 25.

The North Korean blitzkrieg exposed the lack of preparedness and experience within the ROK military. In the months before the war, US analysts had considered the military balance of power on the peninsula to be in favor of the South, and the State Department worried Rhee might make good his threat to unilaterally invade the North and precipitate a broader conflict. The swift and decisive Northern progress, and the collapse of the Southern army, proved this calculation terribly wrong. The combination of Soviet-supplied heavy armor and battle-experienced North Korean troops proved to be unstoppable in the first weeks of the war. The North Koreans drove the ROK government and its military out of Seoul in two days. The first weeks of the war recorded disaster after disaster for the ROK troops and the few American combat troops who had arrived on short notice to help. The decision to come to the aid of the ROK was the first major test of the containment policy that became the lynchpin of American Cold War strategy to limit further spread of Communism throughout the world. The test came at a very bad time because the demobilizing US army had to scramble to find troops to dispatch to Korea, and it was uncertain how the US decision to defend South Korea would play in domestic politics.

The inexorable North Korean advance continued in mid-July as the North Korean army overran the key city of Taejŏn, capturing US Maj. Gen. William F.

Dean. Then the army forked, sending one group of troops southwest into the Cholla province while the other drove the main ROK and US forces southeast toward Korea's largest port and second largest city, Pusan. At this point the United States successfully petitioned the United Nations for a mandate to defend South Korea and roll back the invasion. The Americans won the Security Council vote because the Soviet delegate surprisingly departed the session in protest. A Soviet veto would have blocked UN action on the Korean crisis. The United States, therefore, turned the defense of South Korea into a UN "police action" that was under the command of an American general and in which 95 percent of the non-Korean, "international" UN force were US troops. The ROK army was put under UN command. Ironically, this major action by the United Nations hinged on the inadvertent mistake of a Soviet diplomat; for the rest of the Cold War, Security Council actions were stalemated by mutual vetoes of the antagonistic superpowers.

At the beginning of August the advance by the North Korean People's Army halted after it had occupied virtually all of South Korea. The US and ROK forces faced a determined and well-led fighting force that worked in league with guerrilla forces in the South. At the decisive battle in Taejŏn, 150 kilometers south of Seoul, the KPA worked with local peasants fighting on the flanks and rear of the retreating ROK and American forces. After Taejŏn the way was open to drive southeast toward Pusan. It was here that General MacArthur, leading the US First Marine Division, and ROK army, managed to organize a defense along a forty-to-fifty-mile arc known in military history as the Pusan perimeter. While the main KPA forces pushed southward along the Seoul-Pusan corridor, another North Korean army had already swept along the western coast, through the Cholla provinces, and then eastward along the south coast to threaten Pusan on its western front. From August until mid-September the North Koreans occupied South Korea and added a political front to their already effective conventional military and guerrilla conquest of the South.

During their roughly fifty-day occupation, the North Koreans attempted to replicate their northern revolution in the South, and many South Koreans joined them. Political cadres from the North began systematically to restore the disbanded people's committees in order to undo what they believed had been a reimposition of colonialism under the US occupation. Bringing their own lists of peoples' enemies, they began a purge of collaborators of all stripes. They emptied the ROK jails of political prisoners, unleashing a backlash of reprisals against the system that had incarcerated them. The North also immediately began a land reform in all occupied territories; while hastily accomplished and in the end temporary, this reform further undermined the social power structure in the South and added to the confusion and violence when the Northern forces retreated after mid-September.

The North Koreans attracted new supporters to their cause, but the occupation was short-lived, and in the confusion of this roughly fifty-day interval discipline was difficult to maintain and violence endemic. That mass killings and

arrests were frequent was not surprising because the retreating ROK troops and their American advisors had committed their own atrocities. In the retreat and confusion during June and July, the desperate ROK and US troops, harassed by guerrilla and peasant irregulars, had turned on entire villages. Survivors of these atrocities rallied around the advancing KPA, urging reprisals against captured ROK forces; some were emboldened to seek out class enemies themselves. More so than during any other part of the war, the internecine terror and violence of this phase has remained obscured in the accounts that focused instead on the forward movement of troops and the main battles.<sup>7</sup> But for Koreans, the fateful decision of hundreds of thousands to support or not support the Northern troops remains woven into the fabric of postwar memory. This was especially so because the North Korean occupation and nascent revolution was temporary, and set off a new wave of violence when South Korean forces reoccupied the territory and began a new round of reprisals against all who might have rallied to the Northern cause. And for their part the North Koreans either killed or abducted to the North thousands of prominent South Korean politicians and intellectuals.<sup>8</sup> To this day entries in South Korean biographical dictionaries bare witness to this phase of the war in the death-day notation for hundreds of entries: "Birth date-1950?," "taken north (*nambuk*), or simply "dates unknown."

The US intervention under UN auspices shifted the course of the war with a massive counterattack in late September. General MacArthur's now famous amphibious assault of the port city of Inch'ŏn on September 15 dropped an army to the rear of the North Koreans, effectively cutting their forces in two. The UN forces broke out of the Pusan perimeter to chase the collapsing North Korean army north. A month later the UN and ROK forces recaptured Seoul. With the enemy in seemingly full retreat, the idea of crossing the 38th parallel to roll back the North Koreans and perhaps reclaim the peninsula gained currency in Washington. MacArthur was eager to press the offensive and soon the UN forces drove northward, capturing P'yŏngyang, then proceeding toward the Yalu, in what became MacArthur's famous "reconnaissance in force." By late November forward units of the US Eighth Army reached the Yalu River in the northwest and ROK units captured the port city of Ch'ŏngjin in the extreme northeast.

We now know that US aerial reconnaissance had informed MacArthur that massive columns of Chinese troops had been seen moving into Korea over the preceding weeks. On November 27 reports of large-scale Chinese assaults in the rear of the US units heralded a disaster. MacArthur had allowed the Chinese to infiltrate the rear of his overextended columns and confident projections of total victory turned to reports of a "strategic withdrawal." In short, the Chinese and North Korean troops had cut up the forward elements of MacArthur's army and were chasing the UN forces pell-mell southward. By December 6 they had recaptured P'yŏngyang and by the end of December had overrun Seoul for the second time in the war.



Refugees fleeing south of Seoul. Source: SRC Peter Ruplenas, 7th Signal Corps, US Army.

Since the entry of the Chinese into the war was not a surprise to US army intelligence, why did MacArthur push to the Yalu in the face of certain danger? Scholars will debate the reasons, but it appears to boil down to MacArthur's conservative politics and his desire to reopen the war with China in the hopes of destroying the People's Republic of China (PRC) and thereby helping America's erstwhile allies, the defeated Nationalists on Taiwan, to regain control on the mainland. The Chinese entry into the Korean War created a heated debate in Washington. Policymakers considered all manner of options, including the use of nuclear weapons. But cooler heads prevailed, and World War III was averted.

Eventually the UN forces stopped and reversed the southward movement of the Chinese, recaptured Seoul, and drove the enemy northward to a line closely matching the current division between North and South Korea. For the next two and a half years, a bloody and, in retrospect, needless war of attrition ensued. This was the war chronicled in the popular antiwar film *M\*A\*S\*H* and the long-running TV series of the same name. The war had stalemated along a line not much different from the status quo ante bellum, and the Soviets continued to avoid direct involvement.

During the stalemate the debate about rolling back the line by using nuclear weapons continued. MacArthur clamored for permission to reopen a broader

campaign against China and his flagrant insubordination forced President Truman to remove him from command. Beginning in the winter of 1951 and continuing after the start of truce negotiations in the summer, the United States mounted a dreadful campaign of bombing against North Korea. In two years the US Air Force destroyed every North Korean city, its industrial capacity, and its railroad infrastructure; it leveled the major dams and hydroelectric plants and napalmed villages suspected of harboring troops. By the end of their campaign, the US bombers could find no meaningful targets at all and were reduced to bombing footbridges or jettisoning their ordnance into the sea in order to land safely upon return. The memory of this ghastly carnage remains at the heart of North Korean enmity and distrust of the United States to this day.

The war of attrition on the front and the US bombing in the rear provided a depressing backdrop to the deadlocked truce talks. For months the talks foundered on various issues. The final problem was how to repatriate the prisoners of war held by each side. The United States insisted on voluntary repatriation of prisoners, meaning that North Korean prisoners would be allowed to choose either to repatriate or to stay in the South. The North insisted that prisoners from both sides must be repatriated to their country of origin. When the truce was finally signed on July 27, 1953, the three years of fighting had solved nothing. The 1953 border was, with some modifications, the same as it was in June 1950. Seoul was in shambles, having been fought through on four occasions, and the North lay in ruins from the American bombing.

## The Legacy of the Korean War

The war scarred Koreans for several generations. It tore the peninsula in two, dividing it with the heavily fortified DMZ, a two-to-three-mile swath traversing the peninsula for 120 miles from southwest to northeast. The more serious scars, however, were psychological. Koreans have lived the last fifty years in a state of war. Because of this the peninsula is one of the most militarized areas in the world today. The war tore families apart and sent several million refugees from North to South. The North Koreans' brief occupation left a guerrilla insurgency that fertilized the seeds of distrust and discrimination against the region of South Korea where this movement was strongest, in the southwest Cholla provinces. The war polarized politics. In the South anti-Communism became the litmus test for all in politics, the major ideological justification for authoritarianism from above, and the reason for the thirty-five-year intrusion of the ROK military into government.

The solidification of two separate Korean states hunkered down behind their respective fortifications and minefields, ended any lingering hopes for creation of an independent, unified Korean nation. And thereafter North and South Korea embarked on very different paths of nation-building. For its part, North Korea faced the tremendous task of rebuilding a smashed infrastructure and resuming

the construction of its vision of a socialist society. The rapid rebound of the DPRK in the next ten years was a testament to its tenacious will, determined leadership, and ability to organize its population through a centralized mass party to work hard and cleave to the will of the state. North Korea rebuilt its capital, P'yongyang, as a showcase of a worker's paradise. While doing so it began to burrow its defenses and strategic industries into Korea's ubiquitous granite hills and mountains. As they dug, the state and party, if not the general population, developed a bunker mentality, vowing never again to be vulnerable to a threat of such bombing. Fifty years later the North remains captive to this mentality and paranoid about continuing threats from without. In its mind it remains in a death struggle with its implacable foe the United States, but now, burrowed into the earth, it is threatening the world with its own nuclear weapons. From 1953 until the mid-1970s, the country had climbed the mountain of rebuilding and had created a semiflourishing socialist state and economy, but at that point its fortunes began to decline in direct proportion to its commitment to self-defense and autonomy above all else. Chapter Seven examines the development of North Korea's unique brand of socialism, turned into a solipsistic elaboration of its Juche ideology that in turn is built around an extraordinarily elaborate personality cult of the leader.

The South faced its own nightmare of poverty, a smashed economy, and the crushing demands of a population swollen by refugees and riven with political instability.<sup>9</sup> Korea's development until 1945 had been integrated within the Japanese yen bloc of Manchuria, Japan, and Korea. The end of the war had sundered its connections with Japan and China. The division between North and South shattered the natural economic division of labor on the peninsula itself. After the division, 80 percent of heavy industry, 76 percent of mining, and 92 percent of electricity-generating capacity lay in the North, while light manufacturing and agriculture dominated in the South. The North Koreans literally turned off the electricity in the South in 1948, but even before the Korean War the South had faced serious power shortages. Its agricultural production could not meet the food requirements of the population, and the country survived on bulk grain shipments from the United States into the 1960s. The South also inherited the remnants of a Communist insurgency. These were not auspicious beginnings for building a pluralist democracy. Chapter Six examines how the struggle to establish self-sustained economic development as well as a democratic society defined the political culture and social experience of the ROK in the coming decades.

## Chapter Six

# POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH KOREA



**S**OUTH KOREA HAD BARELY BEGUN the process of nation-building in the summer of 1950, when war threw the fledgling republic into chaos: first came the hasty evacuation of the government to Pusan, followed by the brief, but brutal North Korean occupation of 90 percent of its territory, the fight north, the second withdrawal after entry of Chinese troops, and finally stalemate along the original line of division. During the war the government necessarily ruled by emergency decrees, and there was scant room for the development of democratic institutions. After the war, the First Republic under the leadership of Syngman Rhee established patterns that formed the basis of South Korean political culture for the next thirty-five years. Established with an American-inspired constitution that stipulated three government branches, the nascent Republic now had to interpret the relationships between its administrative branch headed by the president, its National Assembly, and its judiciary. Under its strong-willed first chief executive, the presidency monopolized power by extending wartime emergency measures into the postwar era. To do this required creation of a large, intrusive police and internal security apparatus and manipulation of US military and economic aid. Until the late 1980s constitutional governance remained a façade behind which Rhee and later chief executives wielded authoritarian power in what was a barely masked dictatorship.

Leaders in power altered the constitution at various moments of crisis in order to protect or augment their authority, thereby giving birth to six separate republics.<sup>1</sup> Following the student revolution of 1960 the constitution was amended to reduce the power of the executive, but this experiment was short-lived. After the Military Coup of 1961, constitutional amendments were used to thwart formal political opposition, with each change blocking or substantially weakening the power of the opposition within the legal framework. Changes of the election law, a formal shift in structure from a premier to presidential system, and the latitude given the president to declare emergency powers all served at various times to preempt political opposition. A legal framework was constructed that foreclosed the possibility of a peaceful transfer of power to an electoral victor. With little hope of challenging the system, the public turned to mass protest and the politics of the streets. Thus changes at the top were accomplished not through an orderly process of constitutional transition but by unpredictable, often violent protest from