

Foreword

Korea is one of the flash points of international politics. Again and again it hits the headlines. The news reports are often surprising, sometimes disturbing. They make us feel that the tensions between the two Koreas, the Republic of Korea in the South and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the North, are going to be with us for a while. Only a closer look will reveal the details. Only a study of the thick layers of Korea's recent history will allow us to understand current developments. For those who want to reflect about the trouble spot Korea there is no other way but to become involved.

Modern Korean history is complex. To understand it we have to deal with three sets of problems: We have to describe how two contrasting societies and systems developed on the peninsula which had previously known a uniform rule over many centuries. We have to examine the antagonistic policies pursued by each of the Koreas against the other. And we have to study the involvement of the four big Pacific powers, China, Russia, Japan, and the United States, which have strongly influenced Korea's fate.

We are told that the West entered the Korean War (1950–1953) in order to save the “free world”. That may be so, except the Republic of Korea was not a free country at that time. It had an authoritarian ruler, President Syngman Rhee (1948–1960). The signature tunes of his rule were manipulation and corruption. The political situation in Korea got even worse. After a short democratic interlude military dictators followed each other. First South Korea was ruled by General Park Chung Hee (1961–1979), and then by General Chun Doo Hwan (1979–1988), both of whom governed South Korea with an iron fist. A drastic change occurred in mid-1987 when the government suddenly

opted for thorough democratic reforms. These reforms did not come out of the blue. The export-oriented industrialization, initiated by Park Chung Hee and continued by Chun Doo Hwan, had been successful in transforming an impoverished country into “a little tiger”. The improving economic conditions had created a middle class, yet for many of its members the satisfaction with the economic development no longer outweighed the dissatisfaction with the oppressive political conditions. They wanted to determine their political future themselves. It had become impossible for the government to contain by force the movement for greater participation. Democratic rule followed, during a transitory period under Roh Tae Woo (1988–1993), a former general and close ally of Chun Doo Hwan, and then by Kim Young Sam (1993–1998) and by Kim Dae Jung (since 1998) who had been the most prominent dissidents during the time of suppression.

Today, the Republic of Korea is one of the rare examples of a developing country having made its way to freedom. This is a development that as such is worth a thorough study. The bright picture was somewhat damaged by the economic collapse at the end of 1997 which was caused by a rapid deterioration of export prices and an inability to substitute short-term external debt. International assistance was necessary and instrumental in overcoming the crisis. Since then South Koreans do not enjoy in the same way as before when talking about their country’s economic “miracle”.

When we take a closer look at North Korea, we are also in for some surprises. Although Kim Il Sung was the towering figure from 1945 until his death in July 1994, his leadership did not go unchallenged in the early years of the DPRK. He had to fight factionalism, and it was only in 1961 that he had overcome this worst of all Korean political diseases. He then occupied the most important positions within the Korean Workers Party as well as within the government structure. The “great leader” became larger than life. In order to legitimize his leadership he developed the *juche* ideology. The North Koreans have had difficulty grasping an ideology characterized by a mixture of crudeness and finesse, self-praise and ritual repetitions. But they have found one aspect of the message attractive; the demand for the independence of the state which has appealed to their national pride.

The North Korean leadership has introduced a system of control and terror in order to secure its rule. The citizens do not enjoy any freedom. Indoctrination starts with the education of children. Criticism is not allowed. Even traveling within the country is only possible with special permission. Contact

with foreign countries is extremely restricted. It is not the state's function to serve the citizens, but rather to control the citizens for the empowerment of the government authorities.

When Kim Il Sung died in July 1994 the world could watch the unique spectacle in a communist country of the son inheriting his father's position as supreme leader, a form of succession normally associated with monarchic dynasties. It must be added however, that at that moment Kim Jong Il was already holding the key positions in the DPRK. Therefore, it was of no importance that he was formally elected Secretary-General of the Korean Workers Party only more than three years after his father's death. As Chairman of the National Defense Commission he holds the post which, in September 1998, was proclaimed to be the highest in the state. North Korea's economy has been in deep trouble for many years because the deliberate renunciation of the advantage of the international division of labor has backfired. When the situation further deteriorated due to floods and other natural disasters, Kim Jong Il could not find a way out. He, however, continued to rule unchallenged, demonstrating the resilience of his father. And he still enjoyed his father's support who has been made "the eternal President of the Republic" by an amendment to the constitution in September 1998.

From the very beginning the foreign policy of both Koreas was aimed at unifying the country under its respective flag. These aims excluded each other, as was clearly demonstrated by the Korean War. The driving force behind the war was Kim Il Sung. But he could only go ahead after having received Stalin's consent. It was the United States which saved South Korea, and it was China which saved North Korea in a conflict which restored the *status quo ante bellum*.

In the period following the Korean War, confrontation between the two Koreas prevailed. The list of threats, provocation, clashes and hostile acts has become endless. It reaches into the present day. The occasional dialogue between the two governments was considered to be sensational because it occurred so seldom. It always gave rise to great expectations. In July 1972 both sides in a Joint Communique envisaged efforts to achieve unification. In the mid-1980s North and South discussed economic cooperation and the exchange of organized groups. The international thaw made it possible for the prime ministers of both countries to meet in 1990. In December 1991 an Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression and Exchanges and Cooperation was announced, in which both sides again promised to join hands in order to unify

the country. None of these agreements was ever implemented as the policies of both sides continued to differ. North Korea continues to aim at achieving unification on its terms. It will not agree to open its borders under conditions which threaten the present leadership. The South Korean government pursues, under the heading of “sunshine diplomacy”, a step by step approach of trying to engage the North in a process of reconciliation and cooperation. This policy is reminiscent of the West German *Ostpolitik* which believed in “change by rapprochement”. The South Korean leadership is, however, worried about the possibility that the North Korean state could collapse.

There are no miracles on earth. But the fact that the Korean nation survived in spite of the efforts of the surrounding great powers to subjugate the country comes rather close to a miracle. Until the second half of the 19th century Korea had a tributary relationship with China. Around the turn of the century Russia’s influence had become dominant, until Japan annexed Korea in 1910. A harsh rule followed which tried to deprive Koreans of their national identity, a rule which has never been forgotten nor forgiven.

If history knew logic Korea’s fate after the end of World War II in the Pacific should have been liberation. But Korea was divided for reasons of military convenience of the two occupying powers, the USA and the Soviet Union. The line which had been drawn in August 1945 to fix military responsibilities hardened and had become insurmountable. The pattern of the Cold War determined the relations of both Koreas. South Korea relied on the support of the United States and Japan, North Korea enjoyed relations with the Soviet Union and China. Since the beginning of the 1990s this situation changed. South Korea established diplomatic relations with Russia and China, North Korea succeeded in holding bilateral talks with the US government using the threat to go nuclear and to develop ballistic missiles. North Korea also negotiated with Japan. In the Four-Party Talks the two Koreas, the US and China attempt to replace the Armistice Agreement of 1953 with a peace mechanism. So, developments on the Korean peninsula continue to be full of suspense.

This book gives a comprehensive account of Korean politics during the last one hundred years. It is intended to enable the reader to study all important aspects of political developments on the peninsula and those surrounding the peninsula. At the beginning of last year’s fall semester I asked my students at Boston University why they took a course on Korea. One of them, a first generation American of Korean descent, answered that he wanted to learn something about his ancestors not from his father but from an objective source.

I have lived for more than ten years in Seoul and tried to understand Korea and Koreans. Being a diplomat I remained a foreigner who could afford to study and assess events as objectively as possible. Thus I try to give an even-handed coverage of Korea which hopefully will be useful not only for my students. “The century of smooth talk is over, and the pink treatment damages only the one to whom it is applied” (Theodor Fontane).

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