

Making Sense of North Korea

The annual UN General Assembly once again saw much bluster from many world leaders. US President Donald Trump highlighted: *“The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea. Rocket Man is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime. The United States is ready, willing and able, but hopefully this will not be necessary. That’s what the United Nations is all about; that’s what the United Nations is for. Let’s see how they do.”* The North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un responded by calling Trump’s remarks “rude nonsense” and threatening countermeasures. In New York, North Korea’s foreign minister speculated that such a response might entail the atmospheric testing of a nuclear device in or over the Pacific Ocean.

We have seen the rhetoric from both the US and North Korea increasing quite dramatically recently, with both countries threatening to bomb the other back to the Stone Age. Alongside this we have seen North Korea test its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, including an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). The US has conducted military exercises with its allies in the region and flown its strategic bombers very close to North Korean airspace.

The narrative is that a hermit runs a secret police state in North Korea who is ferocious, weak and crazy, all at the same time. Kim Jong-un, like his father and grandfather before him, is considered to be holding the world to ransom by building a nuclear weapon, who must be stopped. As North Korea is not integrated into the global economy it has no way to influence the narrative being defined for it, for this reason it is worth looking at the world from Pyongyang, the North Korean capital.

The Battle for the Korean Peninsula

In 1910, Korea was annexed by the Empire of Japan. After the Japanese surrender at the end of World War II, in 1945, Korea was divided into two zones, with the north occupied by the Soviets and the south by the Americans. Negotiations on reunification failed, and in 1948, separate governments were formed: the socialist Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in the north, and the capitalist Republic of Korea in the south.

Kim Il-sung, the first ruler of North Korea and the grandfather of today’s ruler, Kim Jong-un, was educated in the Soviet Union, he joined Soviet Red Army in 1940, even serving as a major and in 1946 Stalin made him the head of the North Korean Temporary People’s Committee.

When North Korea officially became a country in 1948, Kim was declared its prime minister. Kim Il-sung’s vision for the country was one of a dynasty. This move was immediately supported by the Soviet Union and China.

The Korean War

In 1950, Kim Il-sung convinced Soviet Premier Stalin to provide tanks for a war that would reunify North and South Korea. On June 25, 1950, Kim Il-sung launched a surprise invasion of South Korea, it was so surprising that by the fourth day, North Korea had captured Seoul, the South’s capital. Within a month, South Koreans were on the verge of surrender.

The US, under the guise of a UN authorised force, consisting almost entirely of US troops came to the rescue. Led by General Douglas MacArthur, the supreme commander for the allied forces in Japan, he deployed three US divisions backed by B-26s and B-29s bombers that had demolished Japan. In three months, they drove the North Koreans back to the 38th parallel. US soldiers used conventional bombing which was unlike anything used in the Second World War except Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Pyongyang, the northern capital, was destroyed. Five large dams were bombed, causing floods that wiped out the rice harvest. Many North Koreans were forced to live in underground tunnels. Expecting the war to be over soon and expecting little from China, who only a year earlier was in the midst of a civil war and were viewed with contempt, lacking military skill and bravery and were viewed as a peasant army. Based on this the US forces crossed the 38th parallel and drove the North Koreans all the way back to the Yalu river, which marks the border between China and North Korea. Kim begged Stalin for help, but the Soviet ruler declined. Chairman Mao Zedong of China waited two days before agreeing to assist the North Koreans. *"Imagine how one would feel knowing that you lost your country for those two days,"* said James Person, director of the Center for Korean History and Public Policy at the Wilson Center.

Completely underestimating China, MacArthur found in November 1950 a 300,000 Chinese force halt Americas advance and beat them back to the 38th parallel. Losing a war, he thought he had won, MacArthur called for President Harry Truman to authorise him to use nuclear weapons against China. Truman fired him. The war dragged on in a stalemate for two more years before an armistice was signed by Truman's successor President Dwight Eisenhower in 1953.

This historical experience and Kim's own personal experience shaped the way that the Korean leadership saw the world - as a hostile place with no reliable allies. After three years of fighting, the war ended with only an armistice signed - not a formal peace agreement. A new border was drawn that gave South Korea slightly more territory and created the demilitarized zone (DMZ), between the two nations. The US continued assisting South Korea in its development and China and the Soviet Union remained nominal allies of North Korea.

Self-reliance

After the Korean War, North Korea failed in several assassination attempts on South Korean leaders. For almost two decades after the war, the two states did not seek to negotiate with one another. In the early 1970s when China began normalizing relations with the US, Kim reevaluated the country's relations with China. By the mid-1970's Kim Il-sung began severing ties with China and reemphasizing national and economic self-reliance enshrined in his *Juche* philosophy, which promoted producing everything within the country.

Adopted into North Korea's socialist constitution the idea aimed to create Korean nationalism, Korean pride and reduce the presence of Communism and Chinese influence. As the years went by it became obvious *Juche* was only a mechanism for sustaining the dictatorial rule of the North Korean regime, and justifying the country's heavy-handed isolationism and oppression of the North Korean people. It was a form of Korean ethnic nationalism, but one that promoted the Kim family as the saviours of the "Korean Race" and acted as the foundation of the subsequent personality cult surrounding them.

By the late 1970s, the initial gains of post-war reconstruction and modernization had dissipated, and Kim's ideas had failed to produce any prosperity. North Korea remained highly dependent on trade and aid from the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc. The people's

quality of life stagnated in the 1980s and began to decline until the collapse of the USSR in 1991, at which point the North Korean socialist command economy stopped functioning altogether. There were expectations that the North Korean government would collapse, leading to the unification of the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's sole aim was regime survival. This was made even more precarious in 1994 when Kim Il-sung died.

Economic Collapse

Kim Jong-il took power in the post-Cold War era when North Korea was on the brink of disaster. Realizing the need to handle both external and internal threats, Kim Jong-il instituted a policy called *Songun* - 'military first' that prioritized the military and elites over the general public. Restrictions on travel were tightened and the state security apparatus was strengthened. This policy made the coming crisis even worse for the average North Korean. Many North Koreans blame Kim Jong-il's leadership for the famine. In reality, Kim Jong-il's policies exacerbated a crisis that was long in the making.

The economic collapse and subsequent famine in North Korea had its peak in the mid-to-late 1990s. It is estimated that up to one million people died—roughly 5% of the population.

Even many of those that survived suffered immensely. Starvation in childhood has stunted the growth of an entire generation of North Koreans. The North Korean government had to lower the minimum required height for soldiers because 145 cm (4 feet 9 inches) was too tall for most 16-17 year olds. In Barbara Demick's book "Nothing to Envy," a North Korean doctor tells of how even she became desperately hungry. After fleeing to China, she discovered a bowl of food left out for a dog. Upon examining the white rice and generous chunks of meat, she concluded that "*dogs in China ate better than doctors in North Korea.*" The widespread famine which the government proved incapable of curtailing resulted in it accepting UN food aid in 1996.

The Kim dynasty had failed its people on a colossal scale, this is what drove Kim Jong-il to constantly carry out purges of the army and his own government. Disappearances and murders become the norm. It was at this point Kim turned to accelerate the country's nuclear weapons program.

21st Century

The US had been aware of North Korea's attempts at developing a nuclear device. An agreement was reached between US and North Korea in 1994 after the US warned North Korea of targeting its nuclear reactors. This agreement called for North Korea's nuclear programme to be halted with the shutting down of its Yongbyon reactors which was in operation since 1987. This was in exchange for the US supplying two light-water reactors.

But the US failed to honour its part of the promise and North Korea resumed its nuclear activities, it restarted the Yongbyon reactors and expelled the two international observers from the country. This was the beginning of what is now a regular drama of global politics, the US accuses North Korea of having a clandestine nuclear programme and North Korea counters by accusing the US of breaching its promise of supplying two light-water powered nuclear reactors.

In 2002, Kim Jong-il's government admitted to having produced nuclear weapons since the 1994 agreement. Kim's regime argued the secret production was necessary for security purposes – citing the presence of US-owned nuclear weapons in South Korea and the new tensions with the US under President George W. Bush. Then on 9 October 2006, North Korea successfully conducted an underground nuclear test, making it the first country in the 21st century to enter the elite nuclear club.

North Korea has used the threat of tests and the tests themselves as weapons against its neighbors and the US. It has maneuvered itself into a situation where the US, Japan, China, Russia and South Korea have to sit down with it at the negotiating table in a bid to persuade it not to build weapons. Sometimes, the great powers give North Korea money and food to persuade it not to develop weapons. It sometimes agrees to a halt, but then resumes its nuclear activities. It never completes a weapon, but it frequently threatens to test one. And when it carries out such tests, it claims its tests are directed at the US and South Korea, as if the test itself were a threat.

North Korea's rulers believe that a nuclear weapon boosts the nation's international status.

Nuclear tests bring international media attention, which boosts North Korean pride. Scott Snyder and Kyung Ae-Park argue in their 2013 book, "North Korea in Transition: Politics, Economy and Society," that North Korean aggression brings the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) welcome geopolitical recognition. When the US sends former presidents to engage in diplomatic negotiations with North Korea that's a massive PR victory — and boosts Kim's status and power. State-level diplomatic recognition also contributes greatly to the legitimization of North Korea.

Successfully testing a hydrogen bomb strengthens Kim's claim to know what he's doing as he invests the nation's scarce resources in developing nuclear technology. It proves that he can lead. What's more, it gives Kim heightened stature as a patriotic hero — since neither his father nor his grandfather were able to build and test a hydrogen bomb.

Conclusions

The Kim dynasty have crafted a totalitarian regime, with them at the centre. The power of North Korea's leader, who reigns absolute, is fueled by nationalism and sustained by a structure that has every reason to keep him in place. That, and a zero-tolerance policy toward dissent, explains why the regime has stood stalwart these many years. The US has several thousand operational nuclear missiles. It has a large fleet of strategic bombers, an enormous navy, and hundreds of thousands of soldiers and marines. The US could bomb, blockade, and invade North Korea if it chose to incur the cost. But it doesn't. This is because this small nation allows the US to keep 30,000 troops in the region, which shares a border with China.

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