



## THE KOREAN PENINSULA: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

By Paul Dickler



*Paul Dickler is the Associate Director of the Wachman Center at FPRI and has recently returned from a travel/study tour with The Korea Society. He taught Advanced Placement History at Neshaminy High School for more than 25 years and has made numerous trips to South Korea.*

This article will take a snapshot of Korea today and look back to the past to see the origins. It will offer many comparisons between North and South Korea. Why have North Korea (The Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea--DPRK) and South Korea (Republic of Korea—ROK) become what they are in the present, and what are the most likely scenarios for their future? Is reunification likely, or even desired by Koreans today? Are the troop commitments from the United States going to last another 60 years, or will

events change that dynamic?

When I was a boy, the last veterans of the American Civil War were dying. The old veterans were from "The Great War"—World War I, and many of our parents fought in World War II. It was the youngest veterans who had recently returned home from Korea. Korea was a devastated place then. More than three million soldiers and civilians, mainly civilians, from all sides, had perished. More than 54,000 Americans died, and despite huge North Korean and Chinese casualties, the civilians of Seoul and many other cities in South Korea were overrun. In Seoul's case, there were two major armed invasions.

The war left both North and South Korea in extreme poverty with despotic governments in charge. While the North Korean regime would become among the world's most oppressive, killing and starving millions of people, the South Korean government would take over thirty years to develop into a democracy. The standard of living was actually higher in the North if one looks back to 1960. As late as 1970, the per capita income in both North and South Korea was less than \$2500 a year. Today, South Korea's per capita income is over \$32,500 a year, while North Korea's is less than \$1800 a year. The average North Korean today dies more than twelve years sooner than his South Korean counterpart, 80 versus 68 years. 82 percent of South Koreans use the Internet. Less than one tenth of one per cent go on-line in North Korea.

Both Koreas continued to suffer as a result of the Japanese occupation and colonization from 1910 to 1945. From "comfort women" to cultural oppression to a huge loss of life, the legacy of this period immediately preceding the Korean War remains a potent force even today. While the Korean War dramatically boosted Japan's economy, it wasn't until the Vietnam War that the South Korean economy began to grow dramatically. One of the few outlooks still shared by North and South Korea is a hatred of Japan. On more than one occasion I have had to intervene during East Asia programs attended by Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese. My intervention was to stop actual fistfights from breaking out between Chinese and Korean participants. The reason: Each side insisted it hated the Japanese more, and each side insisted that the Japanese had done more harm to its country.

Park Geun-hye, daughter of General Park Chung-hee, and president of South Korea today, refuses to meet with

Japan's prime minister, Shinzo Abe. South Korea and Japan argue constantly about many things. The barely inhabitable rocky islands known as Dokdo in Korea but called Takeshima by the Japanese, are one dispute. Another is the argument about the name of the body of water between them, long known as "The East Sea" but labeled "The Sea of Japan" on most maps. Just last year Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, one of Japan's largest and a key competitor of the world's largest ship-building facility, Hyundai's in Ulsan, ROK, was fined by a South Korean court for transgressions during World War II. South Korea charges that as many as 300 Japanese firms used forced (slave) Korean labor during the war. When someone from Shinzo Abe's administration visits the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo, Koreans protest loudly. Yasukuni honors Japanese soldiers including those accused of war crimes by Koreans. Koreans keep reminding Abe that his grandfather was a "war criminal" before becoming prime minister. They argue about Shinzo Abe's plans to change Japan's constitution (the one drawn up by Americans after "The Pacific War"). Abe would like Japan to have a more "normal" international posture, in large part due to North Korean provocations. Firing missiles over or near Japan or threatening to do so, have become popular North Korean actions and threats. The North has also kidnapped many Japanese citizens. The list goes on. The United States provides for the defense of both Japan and South Korea. Yet, the ROK and Japan, two highly industrialized, well educated, democracies in East Asia, remain torn apart by their history.

It is now more than 60 years since the end of America's "Forgotten War," a war that in many ways remains a daily fact of life in Korea. As one walks the streets of Seoul today, one sees a miraculous economy with state-of-the-art technology. Tall apartment buildings are so numerous that they can barely be counted when gazing in most directions throughout Seoul. Seoul's "satellite cities" today, would qualify as many countries' largest cities. Seoul's traffic rivals Los Angeles'. Korea has become the world's 15<sup>th</sup>-largest economy, an amazing accomplishment for a nation small in size and limited in natural resources. Cultural icons have been maintained or restored, and Koreans are enormously proud of their cultural history.

While the rest of the world often focuses on China and Japan, smaller Korea has a unique place in world cultural history. Recognition of this fact is a critically important point when looking at Korea. For Koreans "status" is most important—more important than power (Japan) or wealth (China). From technological and cultural advances as far back as the Silla Kingdom (57 BCE to 676 CE) to publication of Hunminjeongum, the proclamation of Korean script (1443 CE) and the completion of Gyeonggukdaejeon, a compilation of laws governing the state (1485 CE) during the Joseon Period (1392-1897 CE), Korea was making significant advances on the world stage. It was builders and architects from Baekje, one of the "Three Kingdoms" (actually four) in Korea, who during the sixth century, came to Japan causing its large temple construction period. From the world famous celadon pottery, to the Tripitaka Koreana, the Korean collection of all Buddhist scriptures carved on 81,000 wooden blocks, to the world's first real printing press in Cheongju (the original printing of the Jikji survives today), all during the Goryeo Period (918-1392), Korea has been making significant contributions to world culture. South Korea is a tapestry of the beautifully preserved and the ultra-modern. Ancient burial mounds are blocks away from bustling modern streets. Fortune telling shamens are blocks away from the ubiquitous skyscraper apartment buildings. However, the Korean War makes even these contrasts pale when comparing the North and the South.

While South Korea began with a higher population in 1945 than North Korea (15 million vs. 9 million by rough estimates), the South's population today is over 50 million, more than double the North's. War, famine, and enforced starvation are the biggest causes of this difference. The North today is plagued by backward farming techniques, undependable electric power, food shortages, little income, global isolation, and poor medical care. Most of these problems are by design. Development money has gone to the military. The Kim family and its friends have an undetermined amount of wealth. The DMZ is the world's largest mine field and perhaps its most tense border.

Most of the 3000-plus escapees from the North to the South this past year, went via China. More than three-fourths of these escapees were women. The men are watched too closely and their disappearance could mean death to their entire family. When defectors from the North reach the South, they are put in special facilities to be re-educated. The initial shock of arriving in the South is very great. Education and adjustment time is necessary if the newcomers are going to have a chance at a new life. In addition, the South must always be vigilant for spies from the North. This gives them time to sort out the picture. At present there are more than 25,000 defectors living in South Korea.

As a military threat, the North has a long history of provocation and is both technically, and at times vociferously,

still in a state of war with the ROK. Recent years have seen a torpedo strike against the South Korean corvette Cheonan (2010), the shelling of the South Korean island Yeonpyeong (2010), a North Korean satellite launch (2012), North Korea's third nuclear test (2012), the restarting of North Korea's Yongbyon reactor (2013), and the temporary closing of the Kaesong Industrial Zone--located in North Korea but open to South Korean companies (2013). Many observers feel that Kim Jong Un does such things to attract attention from the world, and to shore up his power at home. North Korea's military is over 1,200,000 soldiers while South Korea's is 650,000 soldiers. Military spending is over 22% of GDP in the North. South Korea's is less than 3% of GDP, while still being three times the dollar expenditure of the North.

Kim Jong Un's military threats and actions are extremely provocative and yet none have crossed the line in terms of starting a war. South Korea and the United States, while committed to not resuming a war, seek to be best prepared in the event that Kim Jong Un does cross that line. The South Korean government has tried all types of postures over the years, in dealing with the North. Certainly the days of Kim Dae Jung's "Sunshine Policy" are clearly in the rearview mirror. Since propping up its regime is the constant goal in the North, a war would destroy that objective. In a neighborhood surrounded by China, Russia, Japan (backed by the USA) and South Korea (backed by the USA), there is little place to go with the latest military hardware.

As for reunification, this was for many decades the dream of the South. Reunite families, reunite the country, absorb the North into democracy and capitalism. However, young South Koreans today feel less connected to their northern counterparts. They do not want to pay the huge cost of absorbing the North. They would rather ignore the North than be stuck with its problems. Many of their elders also see their point. The many rounds of "Six Party Talks" and other efforts to promote peace and remove North Korea's nuclear weapons, have had little success. The result has been a mixture of stalemate and North Korean escalation of its weapons.

South Korean popular culture has also placed Koreans on a different world stage. K-pop has been amazingly popular throughout Asia—even in Japan. Young Japanese love these Korean pop stars, and maybe an eventual thaw in South Korean-Japanese relations will come from this. Psy's Gangnam Style, popularizing Seoul's Gangnam area, and creating the most played You Tube video in history, underscores South Koreans' impact on popular culture.

It is said that today Korea is one third Buddhist, one third Christian, and nearly 100 percent Confucianist. Confucianism or Neo-Confucianism is the moral foundation of South Korea today. There also remains a healthy dose of Shamanism, surviving from ancient times. In most towns and cities one can find the Shamanist area, marked by signs and the original Swastika. It is perhaps, in part, this Confucianist emphasis on relationships which has permitted the Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Un Dynasty to exercise so much power. Even South Korea was marked by undemocratic rule from Syngman Ree to General Park Chung-hee to General Chun Doo Huan. Democracy did not seem to come easily to Korea, but has been thriving in the South for two decades.

Cultural attitudes and Confucianist-oriented relationships can both strengthen and harm Korea. While South Korea has been excelling in education, business, and innovation, it has also suffered some setbacks. When the South Korean ferry Sewol capsized in April of 2014, shock and shame traumatized the Republic of Korea. How could such an advanced country suffer such a disgraceful catastrophe. Greed on the part of the shipping company, Chonghaejin Marine Co. Ltd.—the ship had more than three times the maximum cargo weight (987 tons) 3,608 tons--and had violated its cargo limit on 246 trips, incompetence in moving more than 350 high school students to this overloaded ship, and incompetence and criminality on the part of the crew, led to more than 300 deaths and a national disgrace. The captain was taking a break and the inexperienced third in command helmed the ship as it made its 45 degree turn, unsettling the cargo and tipping the ferry. This whole affair harmed Korea's status. The high school's vice-principal, who was rescued from the sinking ferry, went home and hung himself because he felt responsible for his students. Ferry captain Lee Joon-seok may be the most hated man in South Korea today.

Korean Air, the most prominent airline of Korea, experienced several crashes before 2000. Investigations revealed that the pilot was being treated as the superior in every way. Co-pilots had to fetch him coffee and do whatever he ordered. When this system of relationships and cultural attitudes were crushed after outsiders were brought in, Korean Air's problems came to an end. Korean Air has had one of the best safety records since 2000.

Conclusions: Looking over this snapshot of Korea, these are some of the conclusions that can be drawn.

1. The stalemate between DPRK and ROK is likely to last for many years to come. Since preservation of power is the goal of the North, both war and peace would most threaten the status quo. Some United States troops may be moving south of Seoul, but not out of South Korea.
2. Kim Jong Un has solidified his power but still craves attention. He will likely continue to provoke his neighbors unless his regime is given the kind of recognition no other country but China might provide. Even China is not pleased with a nuclear North Korea on its border.
3. South Korea is now a real democracy. It was a long time coming, but its people now expect the advantages of a democratic life. They remain Confucianist in many aspects of their daily lives, but when it comes to government, they want to be decision makers. This does not mean that voting for strong leaders has changed. Park Geun-hye is a good case in point.
4. K-Pop, the new Korean cinema, and other recent cultural trends have popularized Korea, especially in Asia. This may ameliorate Korea's feelings of being underappreciated, but status will remain a Korean preoccupation.
5. Korea and Japan will remain hostile towards each other in spite of the logic of creating a unified front against Chinese expansionism, and in spite of their similar relationship with the United States. Japan is likely to change Article 9 in its constitution and develop a more serious military posture.
6. While the South Korean economy will face the challenges of an aging population, it will remain a vibrant and important economy. North Korea, in comparison, is likely to remain impoverished, with poor health care and a low life expectancy. The introduction of cell phones and some Chinese wifi near the border, may slightly lessen the isolation of the North, but it will remain the world's most closed society.
7. Reunification will be less desired by South Korea as time passes. At some point in the future, it may not be desired at all.