



THE TWO KOREAS AND WASHINGTON

by Ralph N. Clough

When the artillery finally stopped firing on July 27, 1953, Korea was a devastated land. The mountains and rice paddies were scarred by trenches and shell holes. Entire villages were erased. Seoul and Pyongyang were partly in ruins. And among the people, the trauma had been profound. The South Koreans had sustained 313,000 battle casualties; more than a million civilians had lost their lives; 2.5 million refugees had fled south from North Korea; and the economy was at a standstill. North Korea had suffered massive destruction and even heavier casualties than the South.

For its part, Washington had demonstrated, at considerable cost, that it would not permit people under its protection to be conquered by Soviet protégés. Similarly, the Soviets and Chinese had shown that they would not allow their communist neighbor to be eliminated.

The South Koreans (with U.S. help) and the North Koreans (with Chinese and Soviet aid) set about rebuilding their battered countries. American G.I.s stood guard with South Korean troops along the new 135-mile-long demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas. They faced the Chinese until 1958, when Peking pulled its divisions back across the Yalu River into Manchuria. Three years later, both the Chinese and the Russians signed defense pacts with North Korea, underlining their determination to maintain a communist buffer state along their borders.

Every American president since Truman has reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to the defense of South Korea. In 1971, however, the improvement of the South Korean Army convinced President Nixon that fewer American troops would suffice to deter an attack; he withdrew one of two U.S. Army divisions stationed in Korea. President Carter has decided that the remaining 14,000-man Second Division can be safely withdrawn by 1982—provided that the South Koreans get additional arms

to compensate for their relative weakness in tanks and artillery, and that U.S. Air Force squadrons in Korea and ships of the nearby Seventh Fleet remain available to back up the South Korean Army.

Today, 25 years after the signing of the armistice, the two Korean states are much stronger politically, economically, and militarily. They confront each other with undiminished hostility. Each of the interested big powers—China, Japan, the Soviet Union, and the United States—has far more to lose than to gain by renewed conflict in Korea, yet these countries have so far been unable to translate this common interest into agreements to reduce the risk of war. And Americans, concerned about human rights in Korea and Seoul's efforts to influence Congress by improper means, are reassessing the results, favorable and unfavorable, of their 25-year postwar involvement in Korea.

In constructing a political and economic system after the war, South Korea had an initial advantage in the leadership of Syngman Rhee, a fervently nationalist leader widely known to his countrymen, if not universally supported. For the Americans, Rhee, 78 years old in 1953, was a prickly ally who reinforced his nationalist credentials from time to time by clashing with the United States over critical issues. Opposing the 1951–53 armistice negotiations, for example, he declared:

The cease-fire talks are meaningless to me. If necessary, Korea will fight on alone . . . to the finish! No least bit of our national territory should remain in Red hands; not a single Korean live a slave's life under Communist domination.

The South Koreans totally lacked the experience necessary to the functioning of a modern democratic state; during 40 years of Japanese rule they had been denied any training in self-government. Rhee and his supporters established a strong presidential regime, overcoming his political foes who sought a parliamentary system. Rhee's arbitrary actions as president—ranging from rigged voting to the midnight arrest of political opponents—made him many enemies. Finally, in 1960, at the age of 85, he was forced to resign in the wake of student riots in Seoul protesting fraudulent elections. With the blessings of Washington, his opponents installed a parliamentary system. But corruption, favoritism, factionalism, economic stagnation, and almost daily street demonstrations led to a military coup in 1961.

The coup leader, General Park Chung-hee, restored civilian

rule, of sorts, in 1963 by resigning from the army to win election as president. He re-established a strong presidential regime, bringing into his government both civilian administrators and ex-military officers, many of them trained in the United States. The Park government followed a pragmatic course, emphasizing political stability and economic growth. By Third World standards, considerable political freedom was allowed: Park's opponents in the 1967 and 1971 elections received as much as 45 percent of the total vote.

In 1972, however, already disturbed by the manifest strength of his opponent in the 1971 elections, Park was shaken by President Nixon's sudden détente with China and his decision to reduce U.S. forces in Korea. Park declared martial law. He made drastic changes in the Constitution, greatly expanding his own powers. He followed up with emergency decrees aimed at throttling dissent. He justified his actions as required, variously, by the changing international situation, the military threat from the north, and the need for unity in conducting negotiations with North Korea. Those negotiations began in 1971-72. A clandestine campaign to buttress support for South Korea in the U.S. Congress also began at this time. It was the beginning of a somber era in Korea's relations with the United States.*

Yet, under Park's rule, South Korea's economy flourished. In the decade from 1965 to 1976 the real GNP more than tripled.† Exports increased at a spectacular 45 percent annually on the average from 1970 to 1976, despite a temporary slowdown in 1975 caused by the rapid rise in oil prices. Export growth, together with ready access to foreign capital, made possible imports of nearly \$11 billion in industrial equipment from 1965 to 1976. Expansion of the shipbuilding, steel, petrochemical, and fertilizer industries got top priority.

*According to the U.S. State Department, America's postwar economic aid to South Korea in 1953-77 totaled \$5,163 million; military aid was \$6,989 million.

†Economic data are taken from the Central Intelligence Agency study *Korea: The Economic Race Between the North and the South* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Document Expediting Project, ER 78-10008, 1978).

Ralph N. Clough, 61, is a Wilson Center Fellow and a retired U.S. diplomat. Born in Seattle, he received his B.A. (1939) at the University of Washington, his M.A. at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (1940). Most of his Foreign Service career was devoted to East Asia, including five trips to South Korea. His books include Deterrence and Defense in Korea: The Role of U.S. Forces (1976).

Per capita income increased year by year; income is now more equitably distributed in South Korea than in many other societies, including the United States. Through government support for agricultural prices and other subsidies, the average income of South Korean farm families has been brought up to the urban level—a rarity in Asia and the rest of the world.*

Expansion of heavy industry in South Korea now has a new goal: to catch up with and surpass the North Korean capacity to produce military equipment, and thus to make Seoul less dependent on outside sources. By 1978, local factories produced machine guns and helicopters, and were beginning to turn out 105 mm and 155 mm field artillery, weapons carriers, anti-aircraft guns, and small naval craft.

Countless Miracles

In the North, unlike Syngman Rhee, Kim Il-sung was not well known at home or abroad when he returned to Pyongyang with Soviet occupation forces after the Japanese defeat in August 1945. But he soon became chairman of the North Korean Communist Party and subsequently purged his rivals one after the other—the homegrown Korean communists, the pro-Peking faction, and the pro-Moscow faction. He came to rely on members of his own family and a small group of senior officials who had been with him as anti-Japanese fighters in Manchuria. And he sought to bolster his legitimacy by encouraging a “cult of personality” approaching deification.

“The respected and beloved leader Comrade Kim Il-sung is a great thinker and theoretician who founded the guiding idea of the revolution of our era,” the official party newspaper *Nodong Shinmun* proclaimed, “a great revolutionary practitioner who has worked countless legendary miracles, a matchless iron-willed brilliant commander who is ever-victorious, and the tenderhearted father of the people who shows warm love for the people of the whole country, embracing them in his broad bosom.”

By the early 1960s, Kim had created, with Chinese and Soviet help, a tightly organized Stalinist society, boasting higher levels of both education and industrialization than South Korea. He ran into economic troubles in the mid-'60s, due partly to the temporary suspension of Soviet economic and military aid. Unlike Park, who had chosen to rely on foreign loans and the rapid expansion of exports to fuel South Korea's economic

*Overall, in constant 1975 dollars, South Korean per capita GNP rose from \$245 in 1965 to \$605 in 1976.

growth, Kim proclaimed the virtues of maximum self-reliance. North Korea's economy lagged behind the South's, in part because Kim focused on the costly expansion of military production. By the mid-'70s, Kim's regime had the capacity to produce complex weapons systems such as tanks and even submarines.

The "Nonaligned" North

In 1971–72, Kim was shocked (like Park Chung-hee) by the willingness of Moscow and Peking to enter into *détente* with the United States. He was discouraged by the failure of his infiltrating commando teams in the late '60s to instigate popular disorder and rebellion in South Korea. He agreed to a dialogue with Park's government. He also relaxed his policy of self-reliance, ordering factories and machinery from Japan and Western Europe in order to offset South Korea's increasing technological advantage. Kim's timing here was unfortunate: Trapped by the sudden rise in world prices of oil and manufactured goods in 1973–75, North Korea ran up debts of \$1.4 billion with non-communist suppliers—six times its annual hard currency exports—and owed some \$1 billion more to communist creditors.

The dialogue between Seoul and Pyongyang, begun amid much hopeful speculation in 1971, soon stalled. North Korea reverted to denouncing the Park Chung-hee government as a puppet of the United States. Kim Il-sung proposed (in vain) separate talks with Washington on the withdrawal of U.S. forces, whose presence he considered the principal obstacle to Korea's unification.

By early 1978, Pyongyang had established diplomatic relations with 92 countries and Seoul with 102; 53 nations, notably excluding the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Japan,* recognized both Koreas. North Korea had also gained membership in the group of "nonaligned" nations, which rejected South Korea's application. In 1973, South Korea abandoned its opposition to the admission of North Korea to the United Nations; Seoul proposed that both be admitted provisionally, pending reunification, but that proposal was rejected by North Korea on the ground that it would perpetuate Korea's division.

For the immediate future, neither significant progress in the dialogue between the two Koreas nor substantial change in the

*But including Austria, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and Portugal.

COMPARATIVE MILITARY STRENGTH



NORTH KOREA

(Democratic People's Republic of Korea)

Population: 16,720,000
 Total Armed Forces: 500,000
 1976 GNP: \$8.9 billion
 1976 Defense spending: \$1 billion (estimated)

Army: 430,000 (2,000 Soviet tanks, mostly T-54/55's, some surface-to-surface missiles)

Navy: 25,000 (10 submarines, former Soviet and Chinese vessels; 7 frigates)

Air Force: 45,000 (630 combat aircraft)



SOUTH KOREA

(Republic of Korea)

Population: 35,200,000
 Total Armed Forces: 635,000
 1975 GNP: \$18.4 billion
 1977 Defense spending: \$1.8 billion

Army: 560,000 (Approx. 1,000 tanks, mostly U.S. M-47/48's; some surface-to-surface and surface-to-air missiles)

Navy: 25,000 (16 destroyers and destroyer escorts)

Marines: 20,000

Air Force: 30,000 (335 combat aircraft)

Source: *The Military Balance*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1977.

rough balance in international recognition obtained between them seems likely. However, South Korea will probably extend its economic lead over the North, which continues to suffer from a shortage of exports needed to pay off its debts and a consequent inability to secure new Western credits. A recent CIA study estimates that South Korea—with a population twice that of North Korea, a large and diversified export industry, and easy access to foreign loans for the import of capital goods—will have a GNP in the early 1980s nearly three times that of the North.

Forgotten Benefits

In arms production, North Korea may still have an edge, although the South will greatly narrow the gap. If the United States makes available the grants and credits for military hardware proposed by President Carter as compensation for the

withdrawal of U.S. troops in 1981–82, Seoul's ground forces should be well equipped in the 1980s to defeat any attempted invasion from the North.

The benefits to American interests from the successful intervention in 1950–53 and subsequent U.S. support of South Korea are now often taken for granted. Yet these benefits are important. Twenty-five years of peace in northeast Asia, ensured by the presence of U.S. forces and an enlightened U.S. policy toward Tokyo, enabled Japan to become a strong industrialized democracy sharing with the United States and Western Europe an interest in an open world of expanding trade, travel, and intercommunication. Continued U.S. involvement in Korea has helped to sustain Japanese confidence in the U.S. defense commitment to Japan, and to ease pressures on Japan to arm itself with nuclear weapons. That commitment, endorsed since 1972 even by Peking, maintains the equilibrium among the big powers in the western Pacific. A growing benefit to the United States is trade. Already South Korea has become the 13th-largest trading partner of the United States; it is one of a very few nations in the world that buys nearly \$1 billion worth of wheat, corn, and other farm products from the United States every year.

“Koreagate”

Inevitably, U.S. involvement in Korea has also brought problems. At Capitol Hill hearings on human rights in 1974–75, witnesses and members of Congress objected to continued U.S. military aid to an increasingly repressive government. Strains between Washington and Seoul over this issue were intensified the following year by the revelation that businessman Tongsun Park and other Koreans had tried to build support for South Korea through gifts to members of Congress.

For months, the Department of Justice and several congressional committees have been investigating the ramifications of these activities. The “Koreagate” scandals have produced such antipathy on Capitol Hill that Clement Zablocki, chairman of the House International Relations Committee, expressed doubt that the military aid requested for South Korea by the Carter administration could be approved by Congress this year.

American specialists are divided over what to do about the Korean relationship. Edwin O. Reischauer, former Ambassador to Japan, stresses the danger that Park Chung-hee's continued suppression of political and civil rights may provoke disorder and violence. He urges the U.S. government to threaten to withdraw all U.S. forces if conditions in Korea do not improve.

Analysts within the U.S. government, however, without condoning Park's harsh political methods, see little evidence of widespread disaffection that could threaten his position. They see the South Koreans' rising standard of living and their fear of the North as an effective damper on discontent. Others, such as Donald Zagoria, a specialist in Sino-Soviet affairs at Hunter College, are less concerned about South Korea's domestic politics than about the U.S. stake in its security. Zagoria urges top-level reconsideration of Carter's decision to withdraw U.S. ground forces from Korea. That decision, in his view, undermines Japanese confidence in U.S. steadfastness and creates an unacceptable risk of renewed conflict in Korea.

A Call for Patience

In my view, it is important that we keep our priorities straight. Renewed conflict on the Korean peninsula would be far more damaging than an American failure to persuade or compel the South Korean government to respond fully to American wishes in dealing with "Koreagate" or infringement of human rights. A recent report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Senator John Glenn (D.-Ohio) and the late Senator Hubert Humphrey urges that congressional decisions on military aid be based on the long-term security interests of the United States, not simply linked to the current bribery scandal. The Glenn-Humphrey report calls for assessment of the military balance in Korea and adequate consultation with both Tokyo and Seoul before each phase of the proposed U.S. troop withdrawal. Moreover, the report suggests, "A major diplomatic offensive should be undertaken to try to bring both Koreas to the negotiating table."

Only Seoul and Pyongyang have the power to moderate their mutual hostility. But the big powers can encourage movement toward peace by making clearer their common opposition to the renewal of conflict in Korea. Continuation of past self-restraint on the part of the United States and the Soviet Union in supplying advanced weapons systems to either Korea is important. Beyond that, vigorous and persistent diplomacy by the United States and Japan is needed. Mobilization of world opinion in support of both the admission of the two Koreas to the United Nations and of recognition of both Seoul and Pyongyang by all the big powers may gradually wear down Pyongyang's opposition to these reasonable propositions. As I see it, the principal weakness of the Carter administration's troop reduction plan is that it involves no comprehensive strategy to improve

the prospects for lasting peace.

Placing higher priority on establishing a stable peace in Korea than on making Park Chung-hee's government more democratic should not mean ignoring the repression of human rights in South Korea. In time, American concern for greater freedom and democracy will have an effect. Unlike the harsh society north of the DMZ, South Korean society remains open to the strong influences of the great industrial democracies, especially the United States and Japan. This openness will bring about the evolution of political and judicial systems in Seoul suited to Korean culture and tradition, but more responsive to the popular will than those systems are today. Patience, not pressure, is the appropriate attitude for Americans.

