

«38th parallel: The confrontation between the DPRK and the Republic of Korea»

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Abstract: The Korean Peninsula was at one point in history a single unified entity until World War II happened. The Northern half was under occupation by the communist USSR, and the Southern half was occupied by the US. The occupation and the subsequent Korean War ensured that the two nations would take diverging paths that have set them apart to this day.

Key words: Economy, productive, eventually, complicated.

Introduction

A nation's division is not just a line on its geographical map; it carves through the hearts of its people. Those who were united for centuries stand separated, forced to acknowledge the political division over the bond of relations, language, and culture. Pictures from the heartwarming reunion of separated Korean families in February of 2014 reflects the pain of that the generation who witnessed the divide and were separated from their loved ones. Newer generations identify themselves as North Koreans and South Koreans.

- South and North Korea took dramatically different social, economic, and political paths following the end of fighting in the Korean War in 1953.
- The 38th parallel marks the so-called demilitarized zone that straddles the border of the two countries.
- Economists find it difficult to analyze the North Korean economy because data is either non-existent or unreliable; however, its authoritarian communist regime keeps economic output sluggish and outdated.
- Meanwhile, south Korea's economy is now one of the world's most advanced and productive in the world.

A Very Brief History

The Korean Peninsula was a united territory under the Josean dynasty that ruled over the region for more than 500 years, starting from 1392 after the fall of the Goryeo dynasty. This rule came to an end in 1910, with the Japanese annexation of Korea. As Japan's colony, Korea was under a cruel Japanese rule for 35 years (1910-1945), a time when Koreans struggled to preserve their culture. During the Japanese rule, the teaching of Korean history and language was not allowed in schools, people were asked to adopt Japanese names and use Japanese as their language. The Japanese even burned down many documents pertaining to Korea's history. Farming was primarily directed towards fulfilling the demands of Japan. After Japan's defeat in World War II, Koreans aspired to be a free nation but were little aware of what they were going to suffer next.

The most pertinent questions regarding the split of the Korean Peninsula are why did it happen, and who was responsible for it?

Japan was on the verge of surrender in 1945, and the USSR was advancing ahead through Korea, crushing the Japanese army when the news of Japan's surrender broke out. The US at that point did not have a base in Korea and feared full takeover of the Korean Peninsula by the Soviet forces. The absence of US troops was mainly due to a miscalculation of when Japan would surrender. To restrict the USSR from seizing the entire Korean Peninsula, the US suggested a temporary division of the Korean Peninsula between the US and USSR. US army colonels Charles Bonesteel and Dean Rusk (the future US Secretary of State) were asked to review and suggest a dividing line on the Korean map. At that time, US troops were 500 miles away, while the Soviet troops were already present in Korea's northern region. The two US army officers were given about thirty minutes to suggest a dividing line. They picked the naturally prominent thirty-eighth parallel to mark the

division of the region. The colonels tried to ensure that the demarcation was prominent enough and Seoul was on their side. Since the suggestion was accepted by the USSR, it restricted the Soviet troops to the thirty-eighth parallel while US troops, gained dominance in the South. At this point, the divide was meant to be a provisional administration arrangement and Korea was to be brought back together under a new government. The differing political ideologies that existed within Korea were further polarized under the influence of the respective superpowers in charge of the region; the Soviets backed communism and the US favored capitalism. In 1947, the United Nations was to oversee the elections in both North and South to form one democratically elected government. There was a significant lack of trust and the planned election could never happen successfully. The elections were blocked in North by the Soviets, who instead supported communist leader Kim II Sung as the head of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The scenario wasn't very different in the South, where Syngman Rhee was supported by the US as the leader of the Republic of Korea (ROK).

Ongoing Conflict

Though both leaders believed in the reunification of Korea, their ideologies were not only different but also opposing. A year later, as a part of a UN agreement, both the US and Soviets were to withdraw their armies from the Korean Peninsula. Though it did happen, there was still a large presence in the form of advisors and diplomats from both the superpowers.

The newly separated regions were often indulging in skirmishes across the dividing line but there were no formal attacks till 1950. In mid-1950, DPRK, backed by the Soviets, saw a chance to unite the entire Korean Peninsula under communist rule and launched an attack on ROK. The DPRK army in a span of three-four months engulfed the entire Korean Peninsula. However, as the UN intervened, troops from around 15 nations (with a majority from the US) came as reinforcement for South Korea. Matters complicated further when China backed DPRK. In 1953, fighting ended in an armistice, giving birth to the Demilitarized Zone , a heavily guarded border almost along the thirty-eighth parallel.

Conclusion

Neither the planned moves by the superpowers nor the devastating Korean War could reunite Korea. Today, North Korea and South Korea are not only separated politically and geographically, but almost seven decades of separation has turned them into different worlds. South Korea is among the trillion-dollar economies while North's population still survives on aid. The two nations have different citizen's rights, laws and order, economies, societies, and daily life. But the history of thousands of years of Korea as a unified nation will always be a reminder of its arbitrary division.

References:

1. Michael Apple, *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Amy Binder, *Contentious Curricula: Afrocentrism and Creationism in American Public Schools* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); Ron Evans, *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004).
2. Professor Diana Hess worked with Jeremy Stoddard, then a graduate student, and a team of other graduate students on the first stage of the study analyzing the non-profit and U.S. State Department curricula: Kristen Buras, Ross Collin, Hilary Conklin, Eric Freedman, and Keita Takayama; and with Jeremy Stoddard and Shannon Murto on the second stage focusing on the textbooks.
3. More detailed descriptions of our findings will be available in Diana Hess, Jeremy Stoddard, and Shannon Murto, "Examining the Treatment of 9/11 and Terrorism in High School Textbooks," in *Educating Democratic Citizens in Troubled Times: Qualitative Studies of Current Efforts*, eds. Janet Bixby and Judith Pace (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, forthcoming 2008).