

The Tragedy of Korea

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Pembroke traces the history of Korea in the 20th century from its occupation by Japan from 1910 to 1945; through its military occupation by the Soviet Union and the United States in 1945; and the formation of two states, North Korea and South Korea, in 1948; to the war from 1950 to 1953, which started as a civil war and became a global conflict, with China supporting the North and the United States and its allies, the South. The war ended in an armistice – a peace treaty is yet to be negotiated.

Key words: China; Japan; Korea; Russia; Soviet Union; United States; Korean War, 1950-53.

As a member of the Royal United Services Institute for more than a decade, it is a privilege to have been invited to address you today.

My interest in Korea has its origin in the experiences of my father, Lieutenant Colonel A. T. (“Bushy”) Pembroke, a long-time member of the Institute. He served in Korea as a rifle platoon commander in the 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment, and was awarded a Military Cross at the Battle of Maryang San on 6 October 1951. I wanted to understand the historic and geo-strategic context for the Korean War of 1950-53. My research took me through North Korea in 2016, from the Yalu River on the Manchurian border, to the demilitarised zone in the south; to Moscow, Beijing, Pyongyang, Washington D.C. and Cambridge; and to the invaluable resources of the Institute’s Ursula Davidson Library, among other sources. The book that resulted, *Korea – Where the American Century Began*, was published in Australia in February 2018 and in the United States in August that year.

The title of this address is the ‘Tragedy of Korea’. There are many aspects to that tragedy, but I am going to focus today on the first five years of the country’s division from 1945-1950. Kim Dae-jung, the mentor of the current South Korean leader and the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, once said that the division of Korea was ‘a brief anomaly in thirteen centuries of unified kingdom’.

Japan 1910-45

The narrative commences at the start of the 20th century. Following its successes in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, Japan moved to annexe Korea and amalgamate it into the Japanese Empire. It prized Korea as a producer of raw materials and as a supplier of labour. From 1910 to 1945, Japan ran Korea as a police state and plundered its resources of people and raw materials. It was a dark period for the Korean people.

The division of Korea into two states was not contemplated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the United States wartime president. Roosevelt had embraced a postwar world order that included a vision of a free and independent Korea, to be preceded by a period of international trusteeship to prepare it for self-rule – a principle embodied in the Cairo Declaration in December 1943. Stalin concurred, subject to the period of trusteeship being as short as possible. On 2 August 1945, the Potsdam Conference confirmed that ‘the terms of the Cairo Declaration shall be carried out’.

Roosevelt’s successor, President Truman, was a different man, with a deep distrust of Soviet-Russia. He preferred to have a buffer state on the Korean peninsula. The division of Korea was not entirely without precedent. Imperial Russia and Japan had considered partitioning Korea in 1896 and again in 1903. In 1945, the determining consideration was Russia’s entry into the Pacific War.

Stalin had agreed at the Yalta Conference in February 1945 to enter the war against Japan within three months of the end of the war in Europe. The German surrender took place on 8 May 1945 and precisely three months later, on 8 August, Russia informed Japan of its hostile intentions. That night the Soviet army moved into Manchuria on a grand scale. Its manifest ability to occupy the whole of the Korean peninsula before American forces could arrive was a source of consternation in the Pentagon. Within days, the first elements of the Russian 25th Army had entered northeast Korea.

The proposal that Korea should be partitioned at the 38th parallel was an American initiative, to which Stalin subsequently acceded. On 10 August, after Truman had returned from Potsdam, and after two atomic bombs had been detonated – over Hiroshima (6 August) and Nagasaki (9 August) – two young colonels from the State Department were given half an hour for the task of determining where Korea should be partitioned and a map of ‘Asia and Adjacent Areas’ from a 1942 *National Geographic* magazine. Working late in the night, they

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selected the 38th parallel. President Truman confirmed their selection a few days later.

The Japanese occupation of the whole of Korea was soon succeeded by American and Russian military occupations of separate parts. All three occupations were repressive in one form or another.

Military Government, 1945-48

Following the Japanese surrender, the United States occupied southern Korea with military forces commanded by General John Hodge, who became the military governor. In due course, Hodge installed an ultra-right-wing nationalist, Syngman Rhee, to form a civilian government.

Patrick Shaw, head of the Australian diplomatic mission in Tokyo (later Sir Patrick Shaw, Australian Ambassador to the United States) reported in November 1947 that in Korea's southern zone: "Real power is apparently in the hands of the ruthless police force which works at the direction of the G-2 Section of the American GHQ and Syngman Rhee. Korean prisons are now fuller of political prisoners than under Japanese rule. The torture and murder of the political enemies of the extreme Right is an apparently accepted and commonplace thing" (Lone and McCormack 1994: 101). Two outstanding nationalist leaders who were opponents of Rhee were both murdered.

By contrast in the north, the man who would become its civilian leader, Kim Il-sung, was a Korean nationalist and a Soviet loyalist, steeled by conflict and struggle. When he arrived in northern Korea in September 1945, he disembarked from a Russian ship and was greeted personally by General Chistiakov, the commander of the Soviet occupation army. In February 1946, Chistiakov installed Kim as head of the first centralised administration in northern Korea, the Interim People's Committee. Stalin personally approved Kim's appointment.

Under Kim's leadership, and Chistiakov's supervision, the people's committee quickly set about nationalising banks and Japanese-owned industries; and publishing a reform plan that involved the confiscation and re-distribution of land, the forgiveness of debt and the lowering of taxes. Within a year, Kim was firmly in power in a society that was tightly controlled; and, like Syngman Rhee, he harboured a conviction to unify the country by whatever means necessary.

An aspect of the Russian occupation of the north which distinguished it from the American occupation of the south, was the presence with the Soviet army of a special political detachment. Its task was to organise political development within the occupation zone. In carrying out its objective, it was assisted by the mobilisation and return to northern Korea of large numbers of ethnic Koreans who had been forcibly resettled in the Soviet interior following Japan's invasion of China in 1937. This pool of Soviet Koreans was a valuable human resource whose members were already Soviet citizens, usually committed communists, and generally spoke both Korean and Russian. Another factor that made the northern occupation easier was the

departure of hundreds of thousands of potential opponents of Soviet rule who fled south – Christians, Japanese collaborators, landowners and other political and economic refugees.

Two States 1948

In October 1947, the United States decided to transfer responsibility for the Korean issue to the General Assembly of the United Nations. It blamed Soviet duplicity, but both were at fault. On 14 November, the General Assembly resolved to establish a United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea to facilitate, expedite and observe the election of representatives to a national assembly, which would then convene and form a 'National Government' of Korea. Its object was 'the attainment of the national independence of Korea' and the 'withdrawal of occupying forces'. It was a hopeless cause. The opportunity for a unified, independent Korea had already been lost.

The resolution was opposed by the Soviets and American support for it was not what it seemed. The United States wanted a separate southern state, supportive of Washington, which would act as a buffer against communist influence.

The Temporary Commission, chaired by Indian diplomat K. P. S. Menon, soon concluded that it could not achieve its mandate to facilitate a 'national Korean government'. Menon was to later write in his autobiography:

"If the Koreans were tenacious of independence, they were equally tenacious of their unity. Nothing was more remarkable than the homogeneity of the Korean nation. They belonged to the same race, spoke the same language and were proud of the same traditions ... until recently, the terms 'North Korea' and 'South Korea' were simply unknown. Providence meant Korea to be one. The North could not live without the South, nor could the South without the North ... Korea was indivisible, whether one looked at the problem from an economic, political or historical point of view." (Menon 1965: 254; Pembroke 2018: 44)

Menon reported to the Interim Committee of the General Assembly that "the formation of a separate government in south Korea will not facilitate the objectives of the (United Nations) resolution, namely the attainment of the national independence of Korea and the withdrawal of occupying troops" (Pembroke 2018: 45). This was correct, but it was not what Washington wanted to hear. It ignored Menon's considered opinion and the near unanimous concerns of his colleagues. Its self-interested object was to keep alive supervised elections in the south, even though national elections for the whole of Korea were not feasible.

On 26 February 1948, the Interim Committee of the United Nations ordered the Commission to implement the programme for the supervision and observation of elections 'in such parts of Korea as are accessible to the Commission'. All knew that this meant only southern Korea. On 11 March, the members of the Commission

voted on whether they would comply with the directive. Despite sustained United States pressure, the Australian and Canadian representatives voted against implementation. Their principled stance was based on the contention that an election that only took place in the south would not advance the cause of Korean unification and would be boycotted by all but the extreme right. America denounced the Australian and Canadian representatives for 'general appeasement of Soviet Russia'. The Australians and Canadians were in a minority on the Committee and the chair, K. P. S. Menon, felt obliged to accept the Interim Committee's directive.

With the election strongly opposed by most Koreans, except Syngman Rhee and his immediate supporters, a North-South Political Leaders Coalition Conference was held in April attended by hundreds of delegates from both the north and the south. Its joint declaration called for the formation of a united government and the withdrawal of all foreign troops; rejected dictatorship and monopoly capitalism; and opposed separate elections – "separate elections in South Korea, if held, cannot express in any way the will of our nation, and will be regarded as a fraud" (Pembroke 2018: 46).

The United States would not be deterred. It proceeded with separate elections in the south on 10 May. The poll was accompanied by a campaign of violence and intimidation that saw 589 people killed. A significant proportion of the nationalist right, as well as those on the left, boycotted the election. Candidates loyal to Rhee won 190 of the 198 seats contested. None of the Commission members regarded the outcome as having established a Korean national parliament and Australia advised the United States that it was 'far from satisfied' with the election. The British Consul-General in Seoul expressed similar reservations, as did the Foreign Office in Whitehall. Hodge complained of 'pettifogging obstruction where it was least expected, the British Empire' (Pembroke 2018: 48). Eventually, on 25 June, the Commission (with Australia absent) declared the election 'a valid expression of the free will of the electorate in those parts of Korea which were accessible to the Commission' (Pembroke 2018: 47).

The Republic of Korea was established in the south on 15 August 1947, with Rhee as its president. Shortly after, on 9 September, a parallel state, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, quietly came into existence in the north with Kim as its president. The formation of the DPRK involved significantly less discord, but lacked the imprimatur of the United Nations.

The sad outcome was that, three years after military partition, the United States, with Soviet concurrence, had succeeded in dividing the nation into two rival republics. The 38th parallel became an international border. Before 1945, a Korean war was inconceivable. After 1945, it was inevitable, as both Kim Il-sung and Syngman Rhee were intent on unification by force.

By 1948, a state of incipient warfare existed with skirmishing along the border. In May 1949, the south initiated a battle at Kaesong that lasted four days. In late June, the north initiated heavy fighting on the Ongin

peninsula. In August, northern border-guards drove a small southern force off a hill north of the border; and the south sent naval patrol boats up the Taedong River, sinking four small North Korean ships. Each side wished to provoke an 'unprovoked' assault on the other so as to ensure the support of its great-power patron in an ensuing war. In 1950, Kim moved first, but only after Stalin relented, following forty-eight pleading telegrams from Kim seeking assistance.

The Northern Invasion

The North Korean army, equipped with formidable Soviet T34 tanks and supported by Russian military advisors who had extensive combat experience, invaded South Korea on 25 June 1950. The South Korean army was no match for the Soviet tanks and the invasion would have been rapidly successful had it not been for a prompt United Nations Security Council resolution authorising the use of collective force and the hasty despatch of American troops from Japan.

The Security Council resolution of 25 June 1950 called on North Korea to withdraw its armed forces to the 38th parallel. A second resolution on 27 June recommended that assistance be given to South Korea to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area. The United Nations authority for the use of collective military force was, in short, to 'repel' and 'restore'.

The North Korean army quickly occupied the whole of South Korea except for an area around the southern port of Pusan, which became known as the 'Pusan pocket'. The American commander, General Douglas MacArthur, responded by executing a bold left-flank envelopment involving an amphibious assault at Inchon, south-west of Seoul and not far below the 38th parallel. With its rear now threatened, the northern army withdrew back to the 38th parallel.

United States Counter-Invasion

Three months after it commenced, the North Korean invasion of South Korea was repulsed and the mandate of the United Nations Security Council achieved. The war should have ended. But hardliners in Washington and Seoul were not prepared to accept the *status quo ante*. On 13 July, Syngman Rhee declared that the invasion of the south had obliterated the 38th parallel and that no peace could be maintained in Korea as long as the division at the 38th parallel remained. In Washington, the National Security Council advised against crossing the 38th parallel, but the Joint Chiefs and others perceived a strategic opportunity which could be used to diminish the size of the world-wide communist bloc. Enthusiasts for cold-war belligerence demanded that American-led forces invade North Korea. They lost sight of the limitations implicit in the moral principle of repelling aggression.

What swung the balance in favour of invading North Korea was the outstanding success of MacArthur's audacious amphibious assault at Inchon. It resulted in a dangerous hubris. On 27 September, the Joint Chiefs,

with Truman's approval, but without authority from the United Nations, ordered MacArthur to destroy the North Korean forces. He was authorised to advance north of the 38th parallel as far as the Yalu River (the border with China). MacArthur needed no encouragement. On 30 September, forces under MacArthur's command, crossed the 38th parallel and in the ensuing weeks drove the North Korean army north to the Yalu River. China, with an army already on the Yalu River, then fulfilled its threat to the United States and entered the war.

China Enters the War

There had been numerous diplomatic warnings from China that it would enter the war if United States-led troops crossed the 38th parallel into North Korea. Washington neither understood nor respected the Chinese leadership and was unwilling to give the cautionary statements from Beijing the credibility they deserved. It ignored the warnings and thought that China was engaging in a poker game. Its attitude combined arrogance, condescension and naiveté.

On 2 October around midnight, the Indian ambassador to Beijing, K. M. Panikkar, who was the principal conduit to the West, was summoned to a meeting with Zhou Enlai. When he returned home in the early hours of the morning, he wrote in his diary:

“So America has knowingly elected for war, with Britain following. It is indeed a tragic decision for the Americans and British are well aware that a military settlement of the Korean issue will be resisted by the Chinese and that armies now concentrated on the Yalu River will intervene decisively in the fight. Probably that is what the Americans, at least some of them, want. They probably feel that this is an opportunity to have a showdown with China. In any case, MacArthur's dream has come true. I only hope that it does not turn out to be a nightmare.” (Panikkar 1955: 111; Pembroke 2018: 82-83).

United States Eighth Army Rout

China entered the conflict in force, with great bravery and using exceptional infantry tactics. The United States Eighth Army was forced to retreat. It was the longest retreat in American military history. Some historians have described it as the ‘most disgraceful’, the ‘most infamous’ and ‘one of the worst military disasters in history’. In reality, it was a rout. President Harry S. Truman declared a state of emergency. Legitimate questions about the wisdom, morality and legality of taking offensive action north of the 38th parallel were lost beneath a wave of moral righteousness and misplaced confidence. Doubters were sidelined, sceptics labelled as appeasers and allies were either ‘with us or against us’ (Pembroke 2018: xvi). Washington wrapped itself in an armour of certitude. Robert O'Neill, the respected Australian military historian, and author of the official history of Australia in the Korean War, questioned the ‘wisdom and morality’ of crossing the 38th parallel, which he said ‘tended to be submerged in general condemnation of North Korea as an aggressor’ (Pembroke 2018: 80-81).

Outcome

A massive bombing campaign of North Korea ensued and the battle line ultimately settled around the 38th parallel. The widespread use of napalm and conventional explosives flattened, burned and destroyed North Korea and instilled in its people a level of distrust and resentment that has shaped the country's continuing hostility towards the United States. More bombs were dropped than in the whole of the Pacific theatre during World War II. In the re-built streets of Pyongyang, the legacy of bombing is bitterness. Civilian casualties are estimated to have been approximately 2-3 million people.

Conclusion

You can draw your own conclusion but I will end on this note. The best-selling writer, Simon Winchester, the author of *Pacific – the Ocean of the Future*, has speculated wistfully that the world might have been a safer place “if the Soviets had been given free rein [in 1945] to invade all of Korea, and be done with it”. In that event, there would have been no Korean war, “merely a Leninist satrapy in the Far East that, most probably, would have withered and died, as did other Soviet satellite states”. (Winchester 2015: 156; Pembroke 2018: 219, 220)

The Author: The Honourable Justice Michael A. Pembroke, a judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales since 2010, is an historian, naturalist and the author of three books. His second book, *Arthur Phillip – Sailor, Mercenary, Governor, Spy* (Pembroke 2013), was short-listed for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards and was runner-up in the National Maritime Museum history award. His third book, *Korea* (Pembroke 2018), was short-listed for the New South Wales Premier's History Awards and the Queensland Literary Awards. He was educated at the Universities of Sydney and Cambridge where he studied history, French and government intending to become a diplomat, but instead turned to the law. He is the son and the father of army officers and has lived and travelled extensively throughout the world. In 2017, he was appointed as a Director's Visitor at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey. [Photo of Justice Pembroke: Colonel J. M. Hutcheson MC]

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