

Why Does North Korea Want Nukes?

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Global Research, April 24, 2017

[Counterpunch](#) 21 April 2017

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Military and WMD](#), [Terrorism](#),
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We are fighting in Korea so we won't have to fight in Wichita, or in Chicago, or in New Orleans, or in San Francisco Bay. -President Harry S Truman, 1952

Why has this tiny nation of 24 million people invested so much of its limited resources in acquiring nuclear weapons? North Korea is universally condemned as a bizarre and failed state, its nuclear posture denounced as irrational.

Yet North Korea's stance cannot be separated out from its turbulent history during the 20th Century, especially its four decade long occupation by Japan, the forced division of the Korean peninsula after World War II, and, of course, the subsequent utterly devastating war with the United States from 1950-1953 that ended in an armistice in which a technical state of war still exists.

Korea is an ancient nation and culture, achieving national unity in 608 CE, and despite its near envelopment by gigantic China it has retained its own unique language and traditions throughout its recorded history. National independence came to an end in 1910 after five years of war when Japan, taking advantage of Chinese weakness, invaded and occupied Korea using impressed labor for the industries Japan created for the benefit of its own economy. As always the case for colonization the Japanese easily found collaborators among the Korean elite Koreans to manage their first colony.

Naturally a nationalist resistance movement emerged rapidly and, given the history of the early 20th Century, it was not long before communists began to play a significant role in Korea's effort to regain its independence. The primary form of resistance came in the form of "peoples' committees" which became deeply rooted throughout the entire peninsula, pointedly in the south as well. It was from these deeply political and nationalistic village and city committees that guerrilla groups engaged the Japanese throughout WWII. The parallels with similar organizations in Vietnam against the Japanese, and later against the French and Americans, are obvious. Another analogous similarity is that Franklin Roosevelt also wanted a Great Power trusteeship for Korea, as for Vietnam. Needless to say both Britain and France objected to this plan.



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When Russia entered the war against Japanese in August of 1945 the end of Japanese rule was at hand regardless of the atomic bomb. As events turned out Japan surrendered on 15

August when Soviet troops had occupied much of the northern peninsula. It should be noted that American forces played no role in the liberation of Korea from Japanese rule. However, because the Soviets, as allies of the U.S., wished to remain on friendly terms they agreed to the division of Korea between Soviet and American forces. The young Dean Rusk, later to become Secretary of State under Kennedy and Johnson, arbitrarily drew a line of division across the 38th Parallel because, as he said, that would leave the capital city, Seoul, in the American zone.

Written reports at the time criticized Washington for “allowing” the Red Army into Korea but the fact was it was the other way around. The Soviets could easily have occupied the entirety of Korea but chose not to do so, instead opting for a negotiated settlement with the U.S. over the future of Korea. Theoretically the peninsula would be reunited after some agreement between the two victors at some future date.

However, the U.S. immediately began to favor those Koreans who had collaborated with the Japanese in the exploitation of their own country and its people, largely the landed elites, and Washington began to arm the provisional government it set up to root out the peoples’ committees. For their part the Soviets supported the communist nationalist leader, Kim Il-Sung who had led the guerrilla army against Japan at great cost in lives.

In 1947 the United Nations authorized elections in Korea, but the election monitors were all American allies so the Soviets and communist Koreans refused to participate. By then the Cold War was in full swing, the critical alliance between Washington and Moscow that had defeated Nazi Germany had already been sundered. As would later also occur in Vietnam in 1956, the U.S. oversaw elections only in the south of Korea and only those candidates approved by Washington. Syngman Rhee became South Korea’s first president protected by the new American armed and trained Army of the Republic of Korea. This ROK was commanded by officers who had served the Japanese occupation including one who had been decorated by Emperor Hirohito himself and who had tried to track down and kill Kim Il Sung for the Japanese.

With Korea thus seemingly divided permanently both Russian and American troops withdrew in 1948 though they left “advisers” behind. On both sides of the new artificial border pressures mounted for a forcible reunification. The fact remained that much of rural southern Korea was still loyal to the peoples committees. This did not necessarily mean that they were committed communists but they were virulent nationalists who recognized the role that Kim’s forces had played against the Japanese. Rhee’s forces then began to systematically root out Kim’s supporters. Meanwhile the American advisers had constantly to keep Rhee’s forces from crossing the border to invade the north.

In 1948 guerrilla war broke out against the Rhee regime on the southern island of Cheju, the population of which ultimately rose in wholesale revolt. The suppression of the rebellion was guided by many American agents soon to become part of the Central Intelligence Agency and by military advisers. Eventually the entire population was removed to the coast and kept in guarded compounds and between 20,000 and 30,000 villagers died. Simultaneously elements of the ROK army refused to participate in this war against their own people and this mutiny was brutally suppressed by those ROK soldiers who would obey such orders. Over one thousand of the mutineers escaped to join Kim’s guerrillas in the mountains.

Though Washington claimed that these rebellions were fomented by the communists no evidence surfaced that the Soviets provided anything other than moral support. Most of the

rebels captured or killed had Japanese or American weapons.

In North Korea the political system had evolved in response to decades of foreign occupation and war. Though it was always assumed to be a Soviet satellite, North Korea more nearly bears comparison to Tito's Yugoslavia. The North Koreans were always able to balance the tensions between the Soviets and the Chinese to their own advantage. During the period when the Comintern exercised most influence over national communist parties not a single Korean communist served in any capacity and the number of Soviet advisers in the north was never high.

Nineteen forty-nine marked a watershed year. The Chinese Communist Revolution, the Soviet Atomic Bomb, the massive reorganization of the National Security State in the U.S. all occurred that year. In 1950 Washington issued its famous National Security Paper-68 (NSC-68) which outlined the agenda for a global anti-communist campaign, requiring the tripling of the American defense budget. Congress balked at this all-encompassing blueprint when in the deathless words of Secretary of State Dean Acheson "Thank God! Korea came along." Only months before Acheson had made a speech in which he pointedly omitted Korea from America's "Defense perimeter."



The Korean War seemed to vindicate everything written and said about the" international communist conspiracy. In popular myth on June 25, 1950 the North Korean Army suddenly attacked without warning, overwhelming surprised ROK defenders. In fact the entire 38th Parallel had been progressively militarized and there had been numerous cross border incursions by both sides going back to 1949. On numerous occasions Syngman Rhee had to be restrained by American advisers from invading the north. The Korean civil war was all but inevitable. Given postwar American plans for access globally to resources, markets and cheaper labor power any form of national liberation, communist or liberal democratic, was to be opposed. Acheson and his second, Dean Rusk, told President Truman that "we must draw the line here!" Truman decided to request authorization for American intervention from the United Nations and bypassed Congress thereby leading to widespread opposition and, later, a return to Republican rule under Dwight Eisenhower..

Among the remaining mysteries of the UN decision to undertake the American led military effort to reject North Korea from the south was the USSR's failure to make use of its veto in the Security Council. The Soviet ambassador was ostensibly boycotting the meetings in protest of the UN's refusal to seat the Chinese communists as China's official delegation. According to Bruce Cumings though, evidence exists that Stalin ordered the Soviet ambassador to abstain. Why? The UN resolution authorizing war could have been prevented. At that moment the Sino-Soviet split was already in evidence and Stalin may have wished to weaken China, something which actually happened as a result of that nation's subsequent entry into the war. Or he may have wished that cloaking the UN mission under the U.S. flag would have revealed the UN to be largely under the control of the United States, which indeed it was. What is known is that Stalin refused to allow Soviet combat troops and reduced shipments of arms to Kim's forces. Later, however Soviet pilots would engage Americans in the air. The Chinese were quick to condemn the UN action as "American imperialism" and warned of dire consequences if China itself were threatened.

The war went badly at first for the U.S. despite numerical advantages in forces. Rout after

rout followed with the ROK in full retreat. Meanwhile tens of thousands of southern guerrillas who had originated in peoples' committees fought the Americans and the ROK. At one point the North Koreans were in control of Seoul and seemed about to drive American forces into the sea. At that point the commander-in-chief of all UN forces, General Douglas MacArthur, announced that he saw unique opportunities for the deployment of atomic weapons. This call was taken up by many in Congress.

Truman was loathe to introduce nukes and instead authorized MacArthur to conduct the famous landings at Inchon in September 1950 with few losses by the Marine Corps vaunted 1st Division. This threw North Korean troops into disarray and MacArthur began pushing them back across the 38th Parallel, the mandate imposed by the UN resolution. But the State Department claimed that the border was not recognized under international law and therefore the UN mandate had no real legal bearing. It was this that MacArthur claimed gave him the right to take the war into the north. Though the North Koreans had suffered a resounding defeat in the south, they withdrew into northern mountain redoubts forcing the American forces that followed them into bloody and costly combat, led Americans into a trap.

The Chinese had said from the beginning that any approach of foreign troops toward their border would result in "dire consequences." Fearing an invasion of Manchuria to crush the nascent communist revolution the Chinese foreign minister, Zhou En-Lai declared that China

"will not supinely tolerate seeing their neighbors invaded by the imperialists."

MacArthur sneered at this warning.

"... They have no airforce...if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang there would be a great slaughter...we are the best."

He then ordered airstrikes to lay waste thousands of square miles of northern Korea bordering China and ordered infantry divisions ever closer to its border.

It was the terrible devastation of this bombing campaign, worse than anything seen during World War II short of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that to this day dominates North Korea's relations with the United States and drives its determination never to submit to any American diktat.

General Curtis Lemay directed this onslaught. It was he who had firebombed Tokyo in March 1945 saying it was

"about time we stopped swatting at flies and gone after the manure pile."

It was he who later said that the US "ought to bomb North Vietnam back into the stone age." Remarking about his desire to lay waste to North Korea he said

"We burned down every town in North Korea and South Korea too."

Lemay was by no means exaggerating.



On November 27, 1950 hundreds of thousands of Chinese troops suddenly crossed the border into North Korea completely overwhelming US forces. Acheson said this was the “worst defeat of American forces since Bull Run.” One famous incident was the battle at the Chosin Reservoir, where 50,000 US marines were surrounded. As they escaped their enclosure they said they were “advancing to the rear” but in fact all American forces were being routed.

Panic took hold in Washington. Truman now said use of A-bombs was under “active consideration.” MacArthur demanded the bombs... As he put it in his memoirs:

I would have dropped between thirty and fifty atomic bombs...strung across the neck of Manchuria...and spread behind us – from the Sea of Japan to the Yellow Sea- a belt of radioactive cobalt. It has an active life of between 60 and 120 years.

Cobalt it should be noted is at least 100 times more radioactive than uranium.

He also expressed a desire for chemicals and gas.

It is well known that MacArthur was fired for insubordination for publically announcing his desire to use nukes. Actually, Truman himself put the nukes at ready and threatened to use them if China launched air raids against American forces. But he did not want to put them under MacArthur’s command because he feared MacArthur would conduct a preemptive strike against China anyway.

By June 1951, one year after the beginning of the war, the communists had pushed UN forces back across the 38th parallel. Chinese ground forces might have been able to push the entire UN force off the peninsula entirely but that would not have negated US naval and air forces, and would have probably resulted in nuclear strikes against the Chinese mainland and that brought the real risk of Soviet entry and all out nuclear exchanges. So from this point on the war became one of attrition, much like the trench warfare of World War I. casualties continued to be high on both sides for the duration of the war which lasted until 1953 when an armistice without reunification was signed.

Of course the victims suffering worst were the civilians. In 1951 the U.S. initiated “Operation Strangle” which officials estimated killed at least 3 million people on both sides of the 38th parallel, but the figure is probably closer to 4 million. We do not know how many Chinese died – either soldiers or civilians killed in cross border bombings.

The question of whether the U.S. carried out germ warfare has been raised but has never been fully proved or disproved. The North accused the U.S. of dropping bombs laden with cholera, anthrax, plague, and encephalitis and hemorrhagic fever, all of which turned up among soldiers and civilians in the north. Some American prisoners of war confessed to such war crimes but these were dismissed as evidence of torture by North Korea on Americans. However, none of the U.S. POWs who did confess and were later repatriated were allowed to meet the press. A number of investigations were carried out by scientists from friendly western countries. One of the most prominent concluded the charges were true. At this time the US was engaged in top secret germ-warfare research with captured Nazi and Japanese germ warfare experts, and also experimenting with Sarin, despite its ban by the Geneva Convention. Washington accused the communists of introducing germ warfare.



Napalm was used extensively, completely and utterly destroying the northern capital of Pyongyang. By 1953 American pilots were returning to carriers and bases claiming there were no longer any significant targets in all of North Korea to bomb. In fact a very large percentage of the northern population was by then living in tunnels dug by hand underground. A British journalist wrote that the northern population was living “a troglodyte existence.” In the Spring of 1953 US warplanes hit five of the largest dams along the Yalu river completely inundating and killing Pyongyang’s harvest of rice. Air Force documents reveal calculated premeditation saying that

“Attacks in May will be most effective psychologically because it was the end of the rice-transplanting season before the roots could become completely embedded.”

Flash floods scooped out hundreds of square miles of vital food producing valleys and killed untold numbers of farmers.

At Nuremberg after WWII, Nazi officers who carried out similar attacks on the dikes of Holland, creating a mass famine in 1944, were tried as criminals and some were executed for their crimes.

So after a horrific war Korea returned to the status quo ante bellum in terms of political boundaries but it was completely devastated, especially the north.

I submit that it is the collective memory of all of what I’ve described that animates North Korea’s policies toward the US today which has nuclear weapons on constant alert and stations almost 30,000 forces at the ready. Remember, a state of war still exists and has since 1953.

While South Korea received heavy American investment in the industries fleeing the United States in search of cheaper labor and new markets it was nevertheless ruled until quite recently by military dictatorships scarcely different than those of the north. For its part the north constructed its economy along five-year plans and collectivized its agriculture. While it never enjoyed the sort of consumer society that now characterizes some of South Korea, its GDP grew substantially until the collapse of communism globally brought about the withdrawal of all foreign aid to north Korea.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, as some American policymakers took note of the north's growing weakness Secretary of Defense Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz talked openly of using force finally to settle the question of Korean reunification and the claimed threat to international peace posed by North Korea.

In 1993 the Clinton Administration discovered that North Korea was constructing a nuclear processing plant and also developing medium range missiles. The Pentagon desired to destroy these facilities but that would mean wholesale war so the administration fostered an agreement whereby North Korea would stand down in return for the provision of oil and other economic aid. When in 2001, after the events of 9-11, the Bush II neo-conservatives militarized policy and declared North Korea to be an element of the "axis of evil." All bets were now off. In that context North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, reasoning that nuclear weapons were the only way possible to prevent a full scale attack by the US in the future. Given a stark choice between another war with the US and all that would entail this decision seems hardly surprising. Under no circumstances could any westerner reasonably expect, after all the history I've described, that the North Korean regime would simply submit to any ultimatums by the US, by far the worst enemy Korea ever had measured by the damage inflicted on the entirety of the Korean peninsula.

(Acknowledgement to Bruce Cumings and I.F. Stone)

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