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The Korean Question: An Unresolved Issue of Asia's Cold War

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The sinking of the Cheonan is emblematic of a Korean War that was never formally concluded. The open-ended Korean question, driven by competing nationalisms, focuses attention on the lack of closure in Asia's Cold War.

25 JUNE 2010 marks the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, a national conflict hugely internationalized from 1950-53, technically halted through an armistice, but not officially ended by any treaty. With the cessation of this first 'hot war' of the Cold War, episodic border skirmishes and military-strategic pressures have punctuated the ensuing cold peace across the intervening decades. Fallout from the recent *Cheonan* incident, in which a North Korean torpedo purportedly sank a South Korean warship, suggests that the Cold War in the Asian hemisphere has not been resolved with the same finality as the demise of its Western counterpart.

Different Cold War Trajectories

The Western-oriented, Eurocentric discourse celebrating the 20th anniversaries of the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), reunification of Germany (1990) and dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991) is mirrored by a contrasting set of interlocking realities in Asia. Last year, the People's Republic of China celebrated the 60th anniversary of its founding, an implicit vindication of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' while Taiwan's status continues to be undecided. Reunified Vietnam pursues 'a market economy with socialist orientation' 35 years after the US military finally extricated itself from the 'quagmire' of the Vietnam War. Europe's Iron Curtain has disintegrated whereas the so-called 'Demilitarized Zone' dividing the Korean Peninsula remains ironically the most heavily militarized border in the world. Given both the contemporary conflicts against Islamic extremism linked to terrorism and persisting nationalist struggles of Cold War vintage, the US military continues to maintain forward presence in the Persian Gulf as well as Northeast Asia, close to potential flashpoints in the Taiwan Strait and Korean Peninsula.

The Historical Pull of the Korean ‘Periphery’

The Korean War’s dynamics were shaped by manipulation as well as misreading of the intentions and actions of decision-makers on all sides. Between April and May 1950, North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung apparently overcame the initial reluctance of Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong to support his concept of forcibly reuniting non-communist South Korea with the communist North. In an opening gambit, Kim directed the North Korean People’s Army to cross the 38th parallel on 25 June 1950. In a response sanctioned by the United Nations, the US 7th Fleet was dispatched to the Taiwan Strait within days while US Army units intervened in defence of Syngman Rhee’s regime in the South. An amphibious assault at Incheon ordered by US General Douglas MacArthur (September 1950) eventually forced a North Korean retreat back across the 38th parallel. US President Harry Truman believed that China would never intervene at the risk of escalating conflict, dismissing Chinese warnings received through neutral-country diplomats as ‘a bald attempt to blackmail the UN’. But Mao was indeed convinced that American intervention made manifest the threat of American imperialist designs as articulated in NSC-68, a US National Security Council document of April 1950 advocating comprehensive containment and disruption of international communism. With the Nationalists’ retreat to Taiwan, many Americans perceived that America had somehow ‘lost’ China to the Communists, and must not also ‘lose’ South Korea. Yet the PRC and USSR both underestimated the US-UN resolve to back South Korea. China’s massive intervention in the Korean War from October 1950 only achieved a stalemate, leading ultimately to a ceasefire on 27 July 1953.

Paradoxically, the smallness and marginal nature of the object—Korea—encouraged high-risk great power interventions in what was essentially an indigenous crisis. The internationalization of a civil war (or war of national unification) in Korea dramatized confusion between ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ interests on the part of both superpowers, plus China. Ironically, Cold War spheres of influence in Asia involved real fighting, whereas those in Europe—the original theatre of contention—never did. The German question revolved around the geo-strategic balance of power in Europe, with the stakes considered too high to risk all-out war between the superpowers and their allies. However, no vital ‘core’ interests of the superpowers were at stake in Korea, only ‘peripheral’ nationalist struggles with alternative visions of their future.

Korean Crisis and the Asian ‘Nuclear Weapons Chain’

The international climate has since changed. Distinctions between ‘communist’ and ‘capitalist’ ideologies, politics and economics have become blurred since China embraced a more pragmatic approach to modernization. Still, the bipolar superpower arsenal has given way to fears of an Asian ‘nuclear weapons chain’, extending from Israel and Iran in the west, Pakistan and India in the south, to China and North Korea in the east. While the concept of nuclear deterrence and strategy of mutually assured destruction (MAD) proved arguably successful in the past, there is no guarantee they would work again if rogue regimes become loose cannons; the Asian ‘nuclear weapons chain’ is as unstable as its weakest link.

Decision-makers of all powers, great or small, must be mindful of the dangers of internationalizing any indigenous struggle, escalating conflict with potentially dire consequences rather than defusing crisis. The findings of the international team investigating the sinking of the *Cheonan* point to North Korean involvement. However, both North and South Korea have exercised comparative restraint in their reactions to the episode, with the North resorting to typically heated rhetoric and the South adopting characteristically defensive posture. The United States, China, and the two interested parties must not allow demons from Asia’s Cold War past to torpedo future efforts to bring about a permanent peace settlement on the Korean Peninsula.

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