

Eastern Pivot of the “Axis of Evil” -- North Korea

By

William R. Polk

In my previous article, I discussed a state in the dangerous passage toward the acquisition of nuclear arms. That was Iran. Now I turn to one that apparently has acquired them, North Korea. How did North Korea get there, what will other states try to do about a state that has “arrived” and what can we expect for the future? These are the questions I will attempt to answer here. I begin with a look at how Korea evolved.

Throughout most of its history, Korea was more acted upon than an actor. For centuries, China was always its teacher and sometimes its master. It borrowed from China Confucianism, its concepts of law, its canons of art and its method of writing. Always it struggled to remain separate but often was overwhelmed by its neighbors, first China and later Japan.

That first “weapon of mass destruction,” the gun, was introduced into China and Japan in the early 16th century and was soon copied and improved upon by Japan. It was Japan that carried out the first large-scale invasion with firearms in 1592. The victim was Korea where within a few years Japan had almost 300,000 soldiers, all armed with guns against Koreans armed only with bows and arrows. Japan gave up the gun and retreated from Korea when it learned that this “weapon of mass destruction” was destroying its own society. But Japan, awakened by Western traders and soldiers in the Nineteenth century, returned to Korea in the Twentieth century, better armed, more organized and more brutal. Korea became Japan’s first colony.

When Japan was defeated in the Second World War, Russian armies came down from the North and met American armies coming up from the south at the 38th Parallel. At first, their purpose was to accept the surrender of Japanese soldiers, but as the Cold War began, they turned Korea into “frontline” bases. By 1947, the bases were becoming countries: the Americans set up their part with Seoul as its capital and imported a long-time émigré, Syngman Rhee, who had not been in Korea since 1912, as their protégé while the Russians set up the guerrilla leader Kim Il-sung in the north with P’yongyang as its capital. On August 15, 1948, the Republic of Korea was proclaimed in the south and on September 9, the People’s Democratic Republic was proclaimed in North. Both claimed sovereignty over whole peninsula, Although the United Nations General Assembly (where the Soviet Union could not exercise a veto) endorsed the government of South Korea as the only lawful government of the Peninsula, the division was fixed.

In 1949, the United States withdrew its occupation forces. That move was apparently read by the North Korean leader, Kim Il Sung, as showing that America had lost interest in Korea. Like Saddam Husain forty years later, Kim misread America’s intent and in 1950 launched an attack on the south.

Within three months, North Korea had conquered the whole peninsula except for a small enclave around Pusan. When American forces arrived, they counterattacked and reached the Yalu river frontier of China. In response, Chinese troops joined the fray and Russian pilots dressed as Chinese flew against American bombers. City after city was destroyed and three million people including 54,000 American soldiers were killed. An armistice was finally agreed on July 26, 1953, but regular war was replaced by espionage and covert warfare in the 1960s. In a particularly dangerous clash in 1968 North Korea captured a US Navy intelligence ship off the coast and shot down a surveillance aircraft.

Meanwhile, the two Koreas developed separately: the south became a major industrial power while the North, after an initial burst of growth spurred by help from Russia and China, fell behind economically. And, while the South's regime was hardly democratic, the North became one of the most tyrannical in the world.

The ruler of the North, Kim Il-sung, feeling let down by his Russian and Chinese protectors and bitter against the Americans whom he believed had cheated Korea of unity (with him as ruler), embarked upon a program of *juche* ("self sufficiency"). The major thrust was toward military power. He built an army of about 1 million soldiers and began to experiment with creating what most countries believe to be the ultimate safeguard, a nuclear weapon and rockets to carry it. Playing a "cat-and-mouse" game with the alarmed Western powers, he agreed to on-site inspections in return for US-South Korean concessions. Apparently Kim wanted to use the possibility of inspections as a lever to bring the United States to accord him "respect" as a significant world leader and North Korea as a world power.

By the early 1990s, Kim Il Sung was said to have relinquished administrative control to his son, Kim Jong II, who was then 51 years old. This was a hard time for the North Koreans because the former Soviet Union was no longer willing to subsidize them and even China, which had taken its place as major trading partner, was attracted by the advantages of dealing with the South. The South, the two Kims must have decided, remained the danger to their regime. They would have been particularly frightened if they had learned, as they probably did, that South Korea was experimenting with plutonium and uranium enrichment, thus giving itself the option of constructing nuclear weapons.

Kim Il-sung was thought by 1991 to have built at least one bomb. Today, North Korea may have several weapons. By reprocessing its 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods and from uranium enrichment programs, it could make half a dozen more. These programs, about which almost nothing is known, show that a determined tyranny can squeeze enough from even a dreadfully impoverished people to make nuclear weapons. Korea is thus a lesson for the world: without a serious attempt to curtail the spread of weapons, they will spread widely since many states have far more industrial and scientific capacity than North Korea. South Korea and Japan have the skills, the industry and the fuel to go quickly into weapons production if they choose to do so. Is Taiwan, fearful of China, secretly now doing the same?

So what will happen now? President Bush said in March 2004 that the US would not “tolerate” a nuclear North Korea. He has since backed off, slightly, from that bellicose position. As intelligence analysts realize, an Iraq-style invasion would be catastrophic: quite apart from whatever nuclear capacity it has, North Korea has a well-organized, highly-disciplined and well-equipped army far larger than Iraq’s; its terrain lends itself, as America discovered in the Korean war of the 1950s, to costly resistance; and it holds a trump card. Its artillery is within range of Seoul and could absolute devastate the Southern economy.

But realism did not keep America out of Iraq and may not keep it out of North Korea. While attempts will be made, as President Bush has announced, to convince Kim Jong II, that “a decision to develop a nuclear arsenal is one that will alienate you from the rest of the world” and economic incentives may be offered in trade for at least a slow-down on the nuclear program, it is unlikely that Kim will agree. That the military option is still under consideration is shown by the little-noticed announcement that the Bush administration has ordered naval maneuvers off the North Korean coast for later this month and has now placed nuclear-missile-armed destroyers there. The North Koreans see this as provocative. If they respond militarily, the effect on the American election is likely to be decisive. It could be a real-life replay of the film “Wag the dog.” Even if this does not happen but, if the Bush administration wins reelection and continues its “forward” policy, the threat of a new Korean war will remain a clear and present danger.

© William R. Polk, October 8, 2004

A former Member of the U.S. State Department’s Policy Planning Council, responsible for the Middle East, Dr. Polk was Professor of History at the University of Chicago and Founding-Director of its Center for Middle Eastern Studies. His latest book, *Understanding Iraq*, will be published in January 2005. He is now Senior Director of the W.P. Carey Foundation.