

Unit 12. Korean Conflict – North Korea, South Korea, USA, and China



In today's world, there are mainly three ongoing conflicts which possess the capacity to escalate into a nuclear conflict. These are **Israel-Palestine, India-Pakistan and the Korean conflict**. Of these three, the most unpredictable and volatile is the Korean conflict; attributed to the megalomaniacal character of the North Korean ruler. In this article, we would cover all the aspects of the Korean Conflict that you must know.



Modern Korea – History from Genesis to the conflict

- The present-day political conflicts in Korea has strong roots in its history – the earlier Chinese and Japanese influence and the later USSR and USA influence.
- The **Joseon Dynasty** ruled most of the Korean peninsula from **1392-1897** (for more than 5 centuries).
- Joseon was the last dynasty of Korea and its longest-ruling neo-Confucian dynasty.
- The philosophy of **neo-Confucian** professed by the Joseon is the strongest linking factor of the Korean peninsula.

- China had considerable influence on the Joseon Dynasty. It was a vassal of Qing dynasty of China. It even leads to a period where Korea was open to trade only with the China. **This explains the historical link between China and Korea.**
- In **1895, Treaty of Shimonoseki** was signed between Japan and China after the former defeated China in **Sino-Japanese war (1894-95).**
- As the result of the treaty, Joseon was removed from the China's vassalage.
- **In 1897, the Joseon was renamed as KOREAN EMPIRE.**
- From 1897-1905 Korea witnessed a strong autocratic rule under Emperor Gojong. He embarked on a journey to strengthen military and market structure of Korea. He was helped by Russia, which had much influence on Korea during the period.
- The **Russo-Japanese war (1905)** ended Russia's influence and with the **1905 Protectorate Treaty**, Korean became a Japanese protectorate.
- **1905-1910** was a period of political turbulence in Korea. It ended with the **1910 annexation of Korea by Japan.**
- **1910- 1945**, Korea was effectively under the **rule of the Japanese.** It was after the fall of Japan in World War-II when seeds of Korean conflict were sown.

The Korean Conflict

The present day Korean conflict is born primarily from the seeds sown during Cold War – between USSR and USA. You may note here that after the defeat of Japan – which was the earlier controlling force of Korea – the super powers were USSR and USA.

Seeds of the Conflict: By USSR and USA



- The Allied forces of the Second World War at **Yalta Conference (1945)**, agreed to establish a **“four-power trusteeship over Korea”**.
- Before a concrete plan could be formulated, the USSR invaded Korea and within a week Japan surrendered. This led to a condition where the north of Korea was under USSR and the south under rest of allied, mainly USA. (the two regions are divided by the **38th parallel**)
- In December **1945 at Moscow Conference**, joint **Soviet-American commission** was established to work on Trusteeship issue of Korea.
- The fear of the spread of communism and the mutual distrust between USSR and USA led to the failure of the trusteeship plan.
- The advent of cold-war the end to the hope of united Korea.
- In **1948** the United Nations proposed free elections across all of Korea. USSR rejected this plan. But an election took place in the American protectorate resulting in the establishment of **the Republic of Korea (South Korea)**.
- The next month the northern part was declared as **Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea)**.
- Both halves tried to enhance their reach, territorially and ideologically, which gave birth to the Korean Conflict.

Escalation of the conflict – The Korean Wars



- In 1950, North Korea, supplied by USSR, launched an attack on South Korea occupying most of the country.
- As a response to the attack, in September (1950) United Nations force led by the US retaliated with brutal force and changed the dynamics of the war.
- 1950-51 period was the most turbulent one.
- The US forces led by Douglas MacArthur wished to use the opportunity to capture the north and hence crossed the 38th parallel. But their aggression led to the entry of China to support North Korea.
- Sensing escalation of the crisis, US president removed Douglas MacArthur in 1951 and peace talks began in 1951.
- Mid 1951 to 1953 saw a period of relative calm despite acts of hostilities from both the sides.

- After the death of Stalin, in **1953**, USSR brokered an **armistice agreement**. It led to (1) An official ceasefire without a Peace treaty. So, in a sense, the war never ended. (2) Exchange of Prisoners of war (PoWs). (3) Establishment of **Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)** – 2.5 miles wide and approximately 150-mile long areas with no military presence. Though its surrounding makes the most fortified border in the world.

The Weapon Race by North Korea

- Under **Kim Jong il** (the second leader of North Korea and father of present leader **Kim Jong-un**) North Korea accelerated their nuclear programme and supposedly developed nuclear capabilities (probably with help of China).
- It withdrew from the **Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)** in 2003. (North Korea is not a member of Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) too)
- Thereafter it tested nuclear explosives in 2006, 2009, 2013, and 2016. Also, it has demonstrated Uranium enrichment capability and possesses weapon grade Plutonium.
- For **denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula**, the **Six-Party Talks** between North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, and the United States **began in 2003**. Though, these are in suspension since 2009.
- There are suspicions that it possesses large chemical weapon arsenal. (North Korea is not a member of Chemical Weapon Convention (CWC))
- In December 2015, Kim Jong Un also claimed to have **thermonuclear capabilities** (the veracity of the claim is, however, a matter of debate).

Korean Conflict: Recent Troubles



- In 2016 North Korea conducted two nuclear test (its fourth and fifth tests). In addition, it successfully launched medium and long-range missiles.
- Despite global condemnation and warnings, it continued its ventures and in March 2017, launched four Ballistic Missiles.
- Portraying an offensive stance, US started deploying THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) in South Korea from March 2017. (Note: For information on India's Ballistic missile defence system click here)
- Unfazed by the threats, on 4th July 2017 (Independence Day of USA) North Korea claimed to have successfully launched an Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), capable of reaching even Alaska, USA.

'North Korea vs South Korea' now 'North Korea vs USA': What Makes Things Worse?



- Megalomaniac attitude of **Kim Jong Un**, who in the past has demonstrated acts of utter cruelty to satisfy his ego.
- The USA under **Donald Trump** is fickle in foreign policy where there seems to be *knee-jerk based diplomacy* rather than *realpolitik*. His action in Afghanistan (dropping of GBU-43) shows his willingness to go to great extents to satisfy his motives.
- China which serves as a lifeline to North Korea hasn't shown concerted efforts to solve the issue. This resulted in blame game started by the US president, which has further made getting China's support a tough task.
- Despite President of South Korea **Moon Jae-in's** call for talks, the North Korean leader hasn't shown much interest. The possibility of talks between the original parties nearly over.
- The conflict which involved territorial issue between North and South Korea has transformed into a tussle between the **USA** and **North Korea**. The launch of ICBM by North Korea on 4th July 2017 proves the point. It reduces the possibility of a local solution and if not resolved in time, it could lead into a full blown nuclear war.

Possible Solution to the Korean Conflict



War is not a solution, it's a progenitor of conflicts. Only total destruction of a party involved can bring peace after war, that too depends on whims of the victorious. Therefore, we won't consider war as a possible solution. Thus the available options are:

- **Breaking Economic life line of North Korea with the support of China:**
 - It is hard to achieve, especially when China consider North Korea as a strategic asset to engage USA without confronting the US directly.
 - Also, if cornered, there is a possibility that Kim Jong Un may take the nuclear path as a desperate measure.
- **A cyber-attack to paralyse the missile and nuclear weapon system of North Korea. Like Stuxnet did to Iran:**
 - Cyber-attacks are best to measure to delay or disrupt but fail on a long term basis.
 - North Korea has maintained a closed network and it's very hard to judge how much damage cyber-attack can do. A mediocre success by cyber-attack would only make North Korea's preparedness more robust.
- **Conciliation based on the initiative of South Korea:**
 - This seems the best option available. To start it, we can resume the **Six-party Meet** that has remained in suspension since 2009. Also, US need to take a bigger step and remove THAAD so that such talks can begin again.

Conclusion: Don't neglect the China factor



In his book “Art of War”, Sun Tzu calls for war where there should be a diversion of enemy’s strength without directly indulging with the opponent. North Korea is the point of diversion of strength, the US the opponent and China the strategist. The continued support to the North Korea by China, directly as well as clandestinely vindicates this policy.

Any solution to Korean Conflict would be either short lived or highly destructive if China doesn’t support it. Korean crisis is the litmus test of *realpolitik* and use of force only shows a lack of wits. In an ideal world, we could call for a concerted effort by all to bring peace. But pragmatism calls for the wait and watch, as for now, peace is not beneficial for the one capable of bringing peace.



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