

## CHAPTER 1

### *Introduction: Korea and the Great Powers in a Changing World*

A shrimp gets crushed to death in the fight between whales.  
 – *An old Korean saying*

Historically, we Koreans have lived through a series of challenges and have responded to them. Having to live among big powers, the people on the Korean Peninsula have had to cope with countless tribulations. For thousands of years, however, we have successfully preserved our self-respect as a nation as well as our unique culture. Within the half-century since liberation from colonial rule, and despite territorial division, war, and poverty, we have built a nation that is the 12th largest economic power in the world.

– *President Roh Moo-hyun's Inaugural Address, February 25, 2003*<sup>1</sup>

#### **The Three Koreas Revisited**

The previous old Korean saying pithily captures the conventional realist wisdom about the security predicament of the weak in the region of the strong. Indeed, there is no mistaking the extraordinary ramifications of great-power rivalry for Korea's place in world affairs. For more than a century, and especially between 1894 and 1953, the Korean peninsula became a highly contested terrain that absorbed and reflected wider geopolitical struggles and even sanguinary wars involving, to varying degrees, imperial Japan, czarist Russia, the Soviet Union, Qing China, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the United States – variations on the Big

<sup>1</sup> An English text available at [http://english.president.go.kr/warp/app/en\\_speeches/view?group\\_id=en-ar...](http://english.president.go.kr/warp/app/en_speeches/view?group_id=en-ar...)

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Four of contemporary Northeast Asian international relations.<sup>2</sup> During this period, except in the Korean War (1950–53), an aggressive, imperial Japan was at the forefront of hegemonic wars in a quest to extend the Japanese hegemony over Korea to the entire Asia-Pacific region – the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 to gain dominance in Korea, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 for mastery over Manchuria and Korea, the Sino-Japanese War of the 1930s, and the Pacific War of 1941–45 (World War II in the Asia Pacific). In the process, Korea as the hermit kingdom was conquered, colonized, liberated, divided, and devastated by civil-cum-international war, spawning a three-stage mutation of Korea's stunted national identity as a shrimp among whales from Chosun (Yi) Korea (1392–1910) to Colonial Korea (1910–45) to Divided Korea (1945–).

Soon after the eclipse of Japanese control over the peninsula came the Korean War, by any reckoning an event beyond compare. More than any other international event since the end of World War II, the Korean War served as the most important determinant in shaping the character not only of the two Koreas, but also of great-power politics in Northeast Asia (NEA) and beyond. Although fueled by escalating political tensions within Korea from 1947 to 1950, and although the idea of initiating the war came directly from Kim Il Sung, in actuality it was a great-power war fought on Korean soil. The United Nations (UN) also involved itself in the war through so-called police action, with sixteen member states dispatching combat troops of varying sizes and incurring casualties of varying magnitude.<sup>3</sup>

The Korean War served as the chief catalyst for a quadrupling of U.S. defense expenditures; for the proliferation of a series of bilateral defense treaties with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, South Vietnam, the Philippines, and Thailand; and for an ill-conceived and short-lived multilateral security organization, the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Yet, as diplomatic historian William Stueck argues, the greatest paradox of the Korean War was how the conflict devastated Korea, militarized the Cold War, and subsequently threatened to escalate out of control, but in the end functioned as a proxy war for what could have been an even more destructive great-power war in Europe – that is, as a substitute for World War III.<sup>4</sup> Its aftereffects were felt for decades as the Cold War played out on the Korean peninsula.

Particularly significant, but not sufficiently acknowledged, is the role of the Korean War in the creation of Cold War identity in NEA and beyond.

<sup>2</sup> For a multidimensional and multidisciplinary analysis of contemporary Northeast Asian international relations, see S. S. Kim (2004e).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed breakdown of the number of participating member states' troops and war casualties, see Ministry of National Defense (2000: 355–56).

<sup>4</sup> Stueck (1995: 3, 370).

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For both Koreas, the experience of the Korean War initiated a decisive shift in identity politics from the competition of multiple identities to the dominance of the Cold War identity. As a consequence, the collective identity of Korea as a whole nation was weakened radically.<sup>5</sup> Although the Korean War accelerated and completed the process of Cold War identity construction, decades later the end of the Cold War, as well as the collapse and transformation of the communist world, failed to turn inter-Korean identity politics around.<sup>6</sup>

The United States, too, owes to the Korean War the crystallization of its Cold War identity, which in turn gave birth to an American strategic culture that thrived on a Manichaean vision of global bipolarity and the omnipresent communist threat. Similarly, until the latter half of the 1980s, Soviet strategic culture was anchored in and thrived on its own Cold War identity. The simplicity of a stark bipolarized worldview provided an indispensable counterpoint for the quest for superpower identity and security in the region dominated by American hegemony. Soviet geopolitical conduct seems to make no sense, except when viewed as the drive to assume a superpower role and acquire equal status with the United States to compensate for its siege mentality and to legitimize its authoritarian iron hand at home. Indeed, the United States was the Soviets' "significant other," the dominant international reference actor, to be envied, emulated, and at times cajoled for condominium collaboration. It is worth noting in this connection that some of the U.S.–USSR rivalries during the Cold War had more to do with the promotion of national identity as status competition than with the promotion of any identifiable "national interest."

As for China, although its troops suffered huge casualties in the Korean War, Beijing succeeded in forcing the strongest nation on earth to compromise in Korea and to accept China's representatives as equals at the bargaining table. No one in the West would ever again dismiss China's power as U.S. General Douglas MacArthur had in the fall of 1950. Indeed, the Korean War confirmed for the national self and "significant others" that China could stand up against the world's antisocialist superpower for the integrity of its new national identity as a revolutionary socialist state.

For Japan, the Korean War turned out to be a blessing in disguise because Tokyo reaped maximum economic and political benefits. By the end of the war, Tokyo had regained its sovereignty and had skillfully negotiated a new mutual security treaty that provided for U.S. protection of Japan, while allowing Tokyo to escape the burden of joint defense. Without becoming involved in the bloodshed or material deprivation, Japan was able to reap the benefits of a war economy that had been imbued

<sup>5</sup> C. S. Chun (2001: 132). <sup>6</sup> C. S. Chun (2001: 142).

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with new potential as a logistical base for the United States and as a key manufacturing center for war supplies.<sup>7</sup> The Korean War and the resulting globalization of antagonistic Cold War identities throughout Asia and Europe have also made it possible for Tokyo to avoid coming clean on its imperial past (thus planting the seeds of post-Cold War identity conflicts in NEA). Emblematic of this phenomenon was the reemergence of Kishi Nobusuke as prime minister in 1957; Nobusuke was the former head of the Manchurian Railroad, a Minister of Munitions in the Tojo government, and a signatory of the 1941 declaration of war against the United States. The return to power of such a person as prime minister was a turn of events that would have been unthinkable in the German context.

Thanks to the end of the Cold War and the other global transformations of the past two decades – globalization and the “third wave of democratization” – South Korea is no longer the marginal shrimp but now a pivotal player in Northeast Asian economics, security, and culture. After South Korea had already taken on a new economic and political identity as a newly industrialized country (NIC) and a newly democratized country (NDC), President Roh Moo-hyun pledged in his inaugural address of February 23, 2003 to devote his “whole heart and efforts” to bringing the Age of Northeast Asia to fruition “at the earliest possible time.” Roh also challenged South Koreans to embrace the growing regionalism in NEA and to play a leading role as the hub of a wheel with collaborative spokes integrating its neighbors into a single unit, a wheel ready to roll on the road of a globalized economy. More recently, in a speech on March 22, 2005, Roh presented his most striking articulation and projection of Korea’s future role that “Korea will play the role of a balancer, not only on the Korean peninsula, but throughout Northeast Asia.”<sup>8</sup>

North of the demilitarized zone, the other Korean state has survived, despite a rapid succession of external shocks – the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, the end of both the Cold War and superpower rivalry, the demise of the Soviet Union and the international communism at its epicenter – on top of a series of seemingly fatal internal woes, including spreading famine, deepening socialist alienation, and the death of its founder, the “eternal president” Kim Il Sung. In fact, not only has North Korea, the weakest of the six main actors in the region, continued to exist, but it has also catapulted itself as a primary driver of Northeast Asian geopolitics through its strategic use of nuclear brinkmanship diplomacy.<sup>9</sup> From this

<sup>7</sup> The United States spent nearly \$3 billion in Japan for war and war-related supplies from 1950 to 1954. See J. E. Woo (1991: 33–34).

<sup>8</sup> An English text available at [http://english.president.go.kr/warp/app/en-speeches/view?group\\_id=en-ar](http://english.president.go.kr/warp/app/en-speeches/view?group_id=en-ar). ...

<sup>9</sup> S. S. Kim (1995).

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transformed geopolitical landscape emerges the greatest irony of the region: today, in the post–Cold War world, each of two incomplete Korean nation-states seems to command greater security sovereignty than was ever enjoyed by a unified Korean state.

For six decades now, two Koreas have existed where there had been only one for more than 1,000 years previously. None of the other countries divided by the Cold War had known such extensive national unity, and yet along with China, the division of Korea has the distinction of having survived the deterioration and dismantling of the bipolar world that had given that division birth and had more generally defined most of the history of the latter half of the twentieth century. Both North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) and South Korea (the Republic of Korea, or ROK) still proclaim sovereignty over the whole of the Korean peninsula. Yet, over the years, each has also developed mechanisms that allow it to function as a “normal” nation-state in the world community. Like conjoined twins attached at the hip, each half of Korea has operated with the knowledge that both its every move and its national identity are reflected in its ideologically opposed doppelganger.

The foreign relations that define the place of North and South Korea in the world community today are therefore the product of the trajectories that the states have chosen to take – or were forced to take – given their Cold War identity and politics. In addition, the choices of the Korean states are constrained by the international environment in which they interact, given that NEA is a region in which four of the world's great powers – China, Japan, Russia, and the United States – uneasily meet and interact. North and South Korea each remain entangled with one of the Big Four through a Cold War alliance: the DPRK to China and the ROK to the United States. Despite the historical identity of Korea as a shrimp among whales, both the DPRK and the ROK have found a new capacity for taking initiatives that would not have been possible during the Cold War years. The synergy of momentous global transformations – democratization, the end of the Cold War and its superpower rivalry, and globalization – has now brought Korea's proverbial identity and role as the helpless shrimp among whales decisively to an end.

The simultaneous potential for new initiatives and lingering regional and global constraints became manifest when South Korean President Kim Dae Jung and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Il embraced each other at an inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang, symbolically signaling their acceptance of each other's legitimacy. The summit was most remarkable because it was initiated and executed by the Koreans themselves in the absence of any external shock or great-power sponsorship. The summit seemed to have brought the two Koreas down from their respective

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hegemonic unification dreamlands to a place where peaceful coexistence of two separate states was possible. While in the wake of the summit Pyongyang proclaimed publicly for the first time that “the issue of unifying the differing systems in the north and the south as one may be *left to posterity to settle slowly in the future*,”<sup>10</sup> South Koreans have been increasingly wary of a German-style unification by absorption and more supportive of engaged interaction with the North, as demonstrated in the “Sunshine Policy” under the Kim Dae Jung administration and the “Policy of Peace and Prosperity” under the Roh Moo-hyun administration. Since the summit, the two countries have arranged family reunions, increased trade, and developed tourism to Mt. Kungang in North Korea. Although Kim Dae Jung proclaimed frequently that he did not expect Korean reunification on his watch or in his lifetime, the gradual and functional pathway to a peaceful reunification of Korea seems more apparent today than ever.

In October 2002, only two years after the Pyongyang summit, in a dramatic although not necessarily surprising turn of events, North Korean leaders were depicted by the Bush administration as having revealed to U.S. interlocutors that they had a highly enriched uranium (HEU) nuclear program under development. This “admission” has led to a series of trilateral and six-party talks involving the Big Four and both Korean states. From the beginning of the talks, the United States expected its South Korean ally to fall in line and support its all-or-nothing demands on North Korea. But the ROK has taken a more moderate position, trying to temper U.S. and DPRK belligerence toward one another and working with China and Russia on more flexible, compromise proposals. Such an alignment of stability-centered interests – with the ROK, China, and Russia all working together – would hardly have been imaginable during the Cold War, yet the fact that the same set of Cold War players are involved indicates a certain sense of *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose* (the more things change, the more they stay the same).

Although the nuclear standoff has been the focus of attention regarding North Korea in Washington and consequently in the U.S. press, Seoul – the presumed prime target of any North Korean nuclear weapons – has continued to pursue functional linkages with the DPRK and has played down the standoff. For the Roh Moo-hyun administration, a government elected in part because of a platform that promised to distance Korea from the United States, the desired international image of North Korea is that of the 2000 summit, not that of the 2002 nuclear revelation. The contrast between these two events and between their legacies reflects the multiple levels at which Korean foreign relations occur.

<sup>10</sup> *Rodong Sinmun [Worker’s Daily]*, June 25, 2000, p. 6; emphasis added.

This highlights with particular clarity that the stability of Korean national identities is not exclusively or even largely a domestic phenomenon, but rather is closely keyed to and conditioned by the stability of the Northeast Asian environment.

### **Korean Identity in the Regional Environment Old and New**

In the early years of the new millennium, there is something both very old and very new in the regional security complex surrounding the Korean peninsula. What remains unchanged and unchangeable is the geographical location of the Korean peninsula, tightly enveloped by the three big neighboring powers. As Jules Cambon wrote in 1935, “The geographical position of a nation is the principal factor conditioning its foreign policy – the principal reason why it must have a foreign policy at all.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, geography matters in the shaping of any state’s foreign policy, but this is especially true for the foreign policies of the two Koreas and their three neighboring powers. A glance at the map and the geopolitical smoke from the latest (second) U.S.–DPRK nuclear standoff suggests why NEA is one of the most important yet most volatile regions of the world. It is hardly surprising, then, that each of the Big Four has come to regard the Korean peninsula as the strategic pivot point of NEA security and therefore as falling within its own geostrategic ambit.<sup>12</sup> The Korean peninsula, divided or united, shares land and maritime borders with China, Russia, and Japan, uniquely situating it within the geopolitics of NEA. Crowded by all four great powers, Korea’s unique place in the geopolitics of NEA remains at once a blessing, a curse, and a Rorschach test.

From China’s geostrategic perspective, Korea has been a *cordon sanitaire* against Japanese continental expansionism. Lying in the path of Russia’s southward expansion in search of an ice-free port, Korea has been a major focus of strategic interest for Russian foreign policy in the Far East. For Japan, Korea served not only as an indispensable corridor for continental expansionism – or as a threat of continental retaliation, “a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan,” in the words of Meiji oligarch Yamagata Aritomo<sup>13</sup> – but also as a major source of agricultural supplies for Japanese industrialization and militarization. For the United States, Korea was initially a backwater in which it had to accept Japanese surrender, later transformed into a frontline domino state, standing against communist expansion.

In the age of great-power rivalry at the end of the nineteenth century, Korea had found itself at a loss. Locating itself in an East Asian regional

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Pastor (1999: 7). <sup>12</sup> See Eberstadt and Ellings (2001).

<sup>13</sup> Green (2001: 113).



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order and not in a larger international community, Korea deferred to China, with which it maintained a (tributary) relationship, when the West came knocking at the door. Korea preferred to remain a Confucian hermit kingdom, isolated from the “barbarian” outsiders. Despite having been subject to numerous invasions and occasional occupations during its 2,000 years of recorded history, Korean civilization possessed and maintained a distinct one-nation identity. When Japan forced China, through treaty, to enter the world of modern nation-states, Korea’s entrance was not far behind. But its existence as an independent nation-state was short lived because Japan exercised increasing control over the country, relieving China of influence in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, doing the same to Russia in 1904–5, and then beginning full colonization of Korea in 1910.

Without the chance to conceive of itself as a modern nation-state before the onset of colonization, Koreans did not do well in forming a cohesive national identity during the colonial period. The March First Uprising of 1919 symbolized a nascent awareness of national identity, but its suppression forcibly transformed the Korean nationalists into a movement of exiles abroad and underground at home. The Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai quickly became embroiled in intense factional conflict, and the Korean communist movement also degenerated into factional strife. The Korean Communist Party (KCP), founded in April 1925, suffered so many defeats that its checkered life was brought to an end by 1931.<sup>14</sup>

On the eve of liberation in 1945, the Korean nationalist movement was fragmented, frustrated, and without a charismatic leader to herald the returning nationalists from abroad. The exile movement suffered from protracted combat fatigue and had been factionalized to such an extent that it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, for any one nationalist leader to unify the newly liberated country.<sup>15</sup> Except for the negative anti-Japanese identity that was shared by all, the nationalist exiles returned home with a set of mutually competing foreign sources of legitimacy; the groups were, in varying degrees, Americanized, Russianized, Sinicized, Communized, or Christianized. Given these divided and divisive identities, Kim Il Sung in the North – and to a lesser extent Syngman Rhee in the South – was driven to link his legitimacy to the national political mythology by exaggerating and even falsifying his national revolutionary background abroad.<sup>16</sup> Just as no single national movement formed before or during colonization, neither did one precipitate after liberation. This was reinforced by the division of the country into zones controlled by the USSR and the United States.

<sup>14</sup> D.-S. Suh (1967: 117–41). <sup>15</sup> S. S. Kim (1976); C. S. Lee (1963).

<sup>16</sup> J. A. Kim (1975: 287, 338).



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The Korean division along the thirty-eighth parallel was initially imposed as part of an ad hoc U.S. zonal plan proposed by Harry Truman on August 15, 1945 – to which the Soviet Union agreed the next day – for dividing up Japanese troop surrender arrangements in the wake of Japan's unconditional surrender on that same day (the biggest national holiday, the Day of Liberation [*Kwangbok chol*]). The hardening of the division was a direct consequence of early postwar superpower conflict. The first blood of the Cold War was spilled in Korea with the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, and at the end of its three years, the war's fatalities would number several million. The war had the impact of restructuring national, regional, and global systems; it had the decisive catalytic effect of institutionalizing the rules of the Cold War zero-sum game, thereby congealing patterns of East–West conflict across East Asia and beyond.<sup>17</sup> The 37,000 U.S. troops stationed on South Korean soil today (to be reduced to some 25,000 as of 2008) serve as a reminder of Korea's role in the Cold War and also indicate the extreme local legacies of that global conflict. The lesson to be acknowledged is that a country's foreign relations are never limited to domestic sources but are products of both regional and global environments, even for a self-defined hermit kingdom like Korea.

In fact, Korea has a long history of being at the center of the Northeast Asian region. For centuries, NEA has comprised China, Korea, and Japan, with only brief interruptions due to the Mongol and Manchu invasions. Therefore, through the various incarnations of regional order – from the Sinocentric world of the Middle Kingdom, to the Japanese imperial world, to the Cold War world, to the post–Cold War era of U.S. hegemony – Korea has remained central, although historically this has not meant that ties were particularly deep.<sup>18</sup> Japan's imperialism and later economic power, Russia's rivalry with Japan and headquartering of a world socialist movement, China's ascendancy at the end of the twentieth century, and the U.S. role as global hegemon have all assigned identities to Korea as these processes worked to define the region and the world.

Nonetheless, NEA is more than a geographical referent. Although geographical proximity is important, defining East Asia or especially NEA in these terms alone is more problematic than may be apparent because any strictly “geographical” approach would hide rather than reveal the critical role of the United States in Northeast Asian international relations and especially geopolitics.<sup>19</sup> If NEA as an international region is

<sup>17</sup> Jervis (1980).

<sup>18</sup> For a collected volume addressing Korea's role in each era, see Armstrong et al. (2006).

<sup>19</sup> The common use of “East Asia” and “Northeast Asia” as one and the same had to do with the fact that Asia, in general, and East Asia, in particular, are so overwhelmingly Sinocentric. As a result, the concept of East Asia “has conventionally referred only to those states of Confucian heritage.” See Ravenhill (2002: 174).

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defined in both geographical and functional terms (i.e., in terms of the patterned interactions among its constituent member states) – as it is in this study – it encompasses China, the two Koreas, and Japan as core states, with the addition of the Russian Far East, and it also involves the United States as the extraterritorial, lone superpower. NEA is said to hold vital importance in America's security and economic interests, and the U.S. role remains a crucial component (perhaps the most crucial) of the regional geostrategic and geoeconomic equations. The United States, by dint of its deep interest and involvement in Northeast Asian geopolitics and geoeconomics, provides more than 80 percent of the 100,000 troops deployed in the Asia-Pacific region, concentrated mostly in Japan and South Korea.<sup>20</sup>

Accordingly, the world's heaviest concentration of military and economic capabilities is in this region: the world's three largest nuclear weapons states (the United States, Russia, and China), one seminuclear state (North Korea), three threshold nuclear weapons states (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan), the world's three largest economies on a purchasing power parity basis (the United States, China, and Japan),<sup>21</sup> and Asia's three largest economies (Japan, China, and South Korea). It was in NEA that the Cold War turned into a hot war, and the region was more involved in Cold War politics than any other region or subregion without nonaligned states. Even with the end of the Cold War and superpower rivalry, the region is still distinguished by continuing, if somewhat anachronistic, Cold War alliance systems linking the two Koreas, Japan, China, and the United States in a bilateralized regional security complex.

As this might suggest, for several reasons, the divide in NEA between regional and global politics is substantially overlapped, if not completely erased. First, the region is "strategic home" to three of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, which are also three of the five "original" nuclear weapons states that are shielded by the two-tiered, discriminatory Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. Second, Japan, Greater China, and South Korea alone accounted for about 25 percent of world gross domestic product (GDP) in 2000.<sup>22</sup> As of mid-2005, NEA

<sup>20</sup> In the latest Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Report, "Northeast Asia" and "the East Asian littoral" are defined as "critical areas" for precluding hostile domination by any other power. See United States Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, September 30, 2001, p. 2 (hereafter cited as *QDRR 2001*) at <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/qdr2001.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> According to the purchasing power parity (PPP) estimates of the World Bank (which are not unproblematic), China, with a 1994 GDP just less than \$3 trillion, had become the second largest economy in the world, after the United States. By 2003, China's ranking as the world's second largest economy remained the same, but its global national income (GNI)/PPP more than doubled to \$6,435 billion. See *Economist* (London), January 27, 1996, 102; World Bank (1996: 188); World Bank (2004: 256).

<sup>22</sup> See Ellings and Friedberg (2002: 396).