

‘Chicken’ in Korea

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We Americans have never had much sympathy for North Korea, even less these days. But a little history can give some understanding of its behaviour, if not sympathy. To understand North Korea’s current bellicose behaviour against the United States and its allies, we need an understanding deeper than an ‘evil lunatic’ theory. We need to recall some post-World War Two history, including some since the end of the Cold War.

The Korean War

North Korea, like South Korea, was a creation of US-Soviet Union pre-Cold War efforts at the end of World War Two to disarm the Japanese – 35-year-long colonial occupants of Korea – and help Koreans govern themselves. Korea was then split along the 38th parallel – US in southern Korea and the USSR in northern Korea – and elections to unify the country were to be held by the United Nations. But disputes between Korean communists and anti-communists made unification impossible.

In 1948, separate elections in both sectors yielded separate governments with separate leaders: anti-communist Syngman Rhee for South Korea (backed by the United States) and communist Kim Ill-Sung for North Korea (backed by the USSR). Each claimed rightful control of Korea. In 1948-49, widespread communist insurrection in the South was put down by Rhee. But it was soon followed by Kim’s invasion of the South. And so began the first war of the Cold War era.

The Korean War was a brutal conflict in which 36,000 American soldiers lost their lives – tragic, though small compared to the

415,000 US deaths in World War Two, a decade earlier. But not so for Koreans, especially in the North (population 9 million) where some 300,000 North Korean military were killed, and even worse was the killing of approximately one million civilians by the unbelievably ferocious US bombing of the North's cities and villages. (The US bombing of North Korea was four times the tonnage of that used against Japan during World War Two.) North Korea was also very likely exposed to US biological weapons and came close to being targeted by atomic bombs. The North lost roughly 20 per cent of its population; the South (population 20 million) suffered terribly as well, with military and civilian deaths at approximately 600,000.

'Axis of Evil'

The 1990s – the decade following the end of the Cold War – promised improved US relations with North Korea, as well as China and Russia. The Clinton Administration made great efforts to discourage North Korea (a party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty since 1985) from the pursuit of nuclear weapons with a deal exchanging plutonium reactors for 'safer' reactors providing power (but no bomb-making by-products). The 'deal' had its frustrating fits and starts, and ultimately failed shortly into George W. Bush's first term. Former Secretary of Defense William Perry claims that, as late as 2000, there was still a fair chance of North Korea foregoing nuclear armament under international controls in exchange for developmental aid and economic benefits. Unfortunately, to North Korea's disappointment and Perry's consternation, the new Bush Administration abruptly ended the talks; less than a year later, Bush announced his infamous 'Axis of Evil' – Iran, Iraq and North Korea. Soon the US unleashed its dogs of regime change on Afghanistan (2001) and the 'evil' Iraq (2003). It must have seemed to North Korea that it was just a matter of time before its number would be up.

Unsurprisingly, the US lawless aggression after 9/11 was almost certainly the straw that broke any North Korean plans for nuclear abstinence – a 'straw' on top of the long concern over US troops, their provocative border exercises, and US nukes in South Korea (not to mention South Korea's decades-long, secret pursuit of its own bomb, which came to light in 2004).

In 2003, North Korea pulled out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty; in 2005, it announced it had nuclear weapons, and it conducted its first atomic test in 2006.



International anarchy

One hardly needs to be a Hitler bent on world domination for one to seek national safety and security via nuclear weapons. After all, the biggest of the big boys have done so for decades and are planning costly and dangerous 'modernizations'. To North Korea, as to rest of the 'respectable' nuclear-armed states, national security based on nuclear deterrence is the only rational way to go. Unfortunately, the reliance on nuclear deterrence in a world of international anarchy – i.e. without an effective system of governance to enforce international law and settle disputes without resorting to war – the risk of catastrophe, though unlikely in the short run, approaches near mathematical certainty over time.

The current nuclear confrontation with North Korea (of the sort that Bertrand Russell called 'brinkmanship') is reminiscent of that dangerous hot rod game of 'chicken' played by crazy, reckless teens in my youth. It's now being played not by two irresponsible boys in fast cars with the threat of head-on collision, but by two irresponsible heads of state with nuclear weapons and the threat of cataclysmic destruction for millions of life-loving, innocent people.

Russell put the point powerfully more than 50 years ago:

'As played by irresponsible boys the game is considered decadent and immoral, though only the lives of the players are risked. But when played by eminent statesmen, who risk not only their own lives but those of hundreds of millions of human beings, it is thought on both sides that the statesmen on one side are displaying a high degree of wisdom and courage, and only the statesmen on the other side are reprehensible ... The game may be played without misfortune a few times, but sooner or later it will come to be felt that the loss of face is more dreadful than nuclear annihilation. The moment will come when neither side can face the derisive cry of "Chicken!" from the other side. When that moment is come, the statesmen on both sides will plunge the world into destruction.'