The Korean War set North and South Korea on separate paths—one toward democracy and prosperity, the other toward tyranny and famine

By Merrill Perlman

If you decide to visit North Korea, don't bother taking your laptop or your cellphone. Even if the North Koreans let you in—and that's not likely—they're going to keep your devices out. Besides, the Internet is heavily restricted, and about the only place with cell service in this country the size of Pennsylvania is the capital, Pyongyang.

Unlike South Korea, the modern and democratic nation with which it shares the peninsula, North Korea has few cars, few factories—which mostly make military equipment—a lot of hunger, and the sense that the country hasn't moved very far into the 20th century, much less the 21st.

North Korea's leader, Kim Jong II, rules 23 million people with an iron hand and very bizarre behavior: He almost always appears in public in a khaki jumpsuit, oversize sunglasses, and platform shoes; he rarely smiles, and has a taste for caviar and Rambo movies. Jon Stewart called him "a comic supervillain."

Yet he has made his nation into a nuclear power and has the uncanny ability to confound far larger and more powerful countries—most notably the United States, China, and Russia.

This contrast—a repressed, hungry citizenry that lays food at statues of its leaders, while those leaders play cat-and-mouse with the West—has existed since the three-year Korean War began 60 years ago, in June 1950.

The Korean Peninsula—with its mountainous industrialized north, rich with minerals and hydroelectric potential, and a strong agricultural base in the south—was long coveted by Korea's neighbors, Russia, Japan, and China, which fought several wars over it. Japan annexed the peninsula in 1910 and brutally suppressed Korean culture in favor of Japanese.

As World War II ended with the defeat of Japan in 1945, the Soviet Union rushed troops into Korea from the north, and the United States sent troops in from the south. They agreed to divide the country along the 38th Parallel line of latitude bisecting the country.

The division was supposed to last only until Japanese influence could be removed. But in 1948, Korean nationalists in the north led by Kim II Sung, a communist-leaning guerrilla, declared the Democratic People's Republic. With Soviet help, Kim built a strong army and assumed dictatorial powers.

The Cold War

South Korea held elections sponsored by the United Nations, and Syngman Rhee became the nation's first President; he aggressively promoted attacking North Korea and used troops to control civil unrest at home.

At the same time, the Cold War, which pitted the United States and its Western allies against their Communist foes in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere, was heating up. In 1949, China fell to the armies of Mao Zedong. In Europe, the U.S. was airlifting supplies to West Berlin to keep it from falling under Soviet control, and a civil war in Greece led America's leaders to believe Greece and Turkey might become Communist.

President Harry S. Truman had already declared that as the world's leader, the U.S. had a responsibility to protect nations threatened by communism; the fear was that if one nation fell to the Communists, another would follow, and so on, like dominoes. (This became known as the "Domino Theory.")

So when North Korean troops crossed the 38th Parallel on June 25, 1950, claiming they were retaliating for a South Korean attack, those conditions "made it nearly impossible for President Truman not to act," says Paul Edwards, founder of the Center for the Study of the Korean War in Independence, Missouri. North Korean troops quickly advanced 25 miles to the outskirts of Seoul, the South Korean capital.

At the urging of General Douglas MacArthur, a World War II hero who was in charge of the
of having nothing left to lose." The solution, he says, "if there is one, lies in the world's ability to

Center for the Study of the Korean War. And North Korea's years of isolation "has put it in a position

"The primary cause of the war remains unsolved: the issue of unification," says Edwards of the

Nuclear Threat

28,000 U.S. troops stationed in the South on alert.

But the North and South are still technically at war today, and tensions remain high, with about

the war for more than 40 years were allowed a brief (and highly scripted) reunion.

that total isolation, with a North-South summit finally taking place in 2000. Families separated by

downward. Disastrous floods in the mid-1990s led to a huge famine and forced him to reconsider

The younger Kim continued North Korea's nuclear program even as his country spiraled

international community for survival." But he died 17 days before the meeting was to begin.

Tensions were high in May 1994, when Kim agreed to a first-ever summit meeting with leaders

and South Korea was virtually where it had been when the war began.

General Mark W. Clark, the commander of the U.N. forces, would later write that he was "the first

United States Army commander in history to sign an armistice without victory."

Rhee, the South Korean President, refused to sign. The North and South remained technically at

war.

The 'Great Leader'

For nearly 40 years after that, South Korea swung between democracy and authoritarianism, going

through a succession of coups, elections, riots, and assassinations even as its economy

continued to develop. Elections in 1988 ushered in the South's current period of prosperity and its

emergence as a manufacturing powerhouse, with the 15th-largest economy in the world.

In North Korea, Kim Il Sung also industrialized, but he believed in self-reliance, which in effect

meant isolation. A cult of personality grew up around him, and people referred to him as their

"Great Leader."

Kim built a million-strong military, and while there were occasional crises—in 1968, the North

Koreans seized an American intelligence ship, the Pueblo, and imprisoned its crew for 11 months

—there were also occasional but feeble attempts to make peace with South Korea. But most

nations wouldn't trade with or give aid to North Korea, sinking it deeper into isolation.

As a result, North Korea didn't benefit from the technological changes that allowed South Korea,

Japan, Taiwan, and China to prosper. And "the collapse of the Communist bloc in the early 1990s

left North Korea with few friends," The Times wrote. "Since then, North Korea, a dictatorship armed

to the teeth but unable to feed its own people without foreign aid, has specialized in provoking the

international community for survival."

Kim turned to trying to build a nuclear bomb. As the West pressured him to suspend his nuclear

program, he would appear to back down under promises of aid, only to renge.

Tensions were high in May 1994, when Kim agreed to a first-ever summit meeting with leaders

from South Korea. But he died 17 days before the meeting was to begin.

His oldest son, Kim Jong Il, already being called "Dear Leader," took over. The Times wrote, "The man

who is expected to be the next leader of North Korea has been described as a ruthless

terrorist, a spoiled playboy, and an erratic manager who will have trouble keeping control of his

country."

The younger Kim continued North Korea's nuclear program even as his country spiraled

downward. Disastrous floods in the mid-1990s led to a huge famine and forced him to reconsider

that total isolation, with a North-South summit finally taking place in 2000. Families separated by

the war for more than 40 years were allowed a brief (and highly scripted) reunion.

But the North and South are still technically at war today, and tensions remain high, with about

28,000 U.S. troops stationed in the South on alert.

Nuclear Threat

"The primary cause of the war remains unsolved: the issue of unification," says Edwards of the

Center for the Study of the Korean War. And North Korea's years of isolation "has put it in a position

of having nothing left to lose." The solution, he says, "If there is one, lies in the world's ability to
draw North Korea back into economic participation, and to seek some means of unifying Korea.”

But in October 2006, North Korea announced it had exploded a nuclear bomb. And early last year, it tested ballistic missiles, expelled U.N. nuclear inspectors, and scrapped all of its agreements with South Korea.

Kim Jong Il, who had a stroke in 2008, has designated his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, as his probable successor, passing over his eldest, Kim Jong Nam, who apparently fell from favor after trying to enter Japan on a fake passport so he could go to Disneyland.

1) Summarize the article into 5 sentences or less, focus only on the main points of the article.

2) Give me three examples of fact and three examples of opinion in the article,

   **Fact:**
   
   1. 
   
   2. 
   
   3. 

   **Opinion:**
   
   1. 
   
   2. 
   
   3. 

3) Create three questions that you would like to ask the author of this article.

   1. 
   
   2. 
   
   3.
4) How many Americans lives were lost in the Korean War? What was the name of the peace treaty that ended the conflict?

5) How many people have died in North Korea since the 1990’s due to crop failure? What has caused the crop failures?

6) What has the North Korean government done to keep control of its people and not allow outside influences?