

Understanding North Korea

Taking a History and Testing Hypotheses

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When there is conflict between two parties, it is best if each party tries to understand and think from the other's point of view, as opposed to thinking only from their own point of view and perpetuating misconceptions regarding the other's view.

When a physician is confronted with a problem, the first step is to take a complete and accurate history; the second step is to test hypotheses generated by that history and the physician's background knowledge and experience.

Let's start by taking a history of what has occurred in Korea over the past century or more:¹

In 1871 Japan began plans to occupy Korea for its own economic and military purposes. By 1905 Korea had become a Japanese protectorate. By 1910 it had become a colony of Japan. For centuries the social structure on the Korean peninsula had consisted of a privileged aristocratic landowning class (a tiny minority of the population) who ruled over the rest of the people, almost all of whom were peasants. In the years following 1910 Japan ruled Korea by conspiring with and providing privileges for opportunistic Koreans who were members of this aristocratic landed class.

Over the next three decades the Korean people suffered many atrocities under the brutal, oppressive rule by Japan and its Korean aristocratic collaborators. During this ruthless Japanese occupation the Korean language and culture were suppressed. Koreans were forced to take Japanese surnames. Precious Korean cultural artifacts were destroyed. And, resistance to the Japanese occupation was met with brutal force. For example, during the non-violent March 1st Movement of 1919 the Japanese police and military killed 7,000 peaceful demonstrators.

Japanese repression in Korea accelerated during the 1930s, after Japan invaded Manchuria (in 1931-32) and established Manchukuo. During the 1930s Japan and its aristocratic Korean collaborators subjected Korean men to forced labor. Other Korean men were forced to join the Japanese military. Up to 200,000 Chinese and Korean women (the vast majority being Korean) were forced into sexual slavery for the Japanese military, serving as "comfort women" while Japanese officers and soldiers occupied Korea and Manchuria

By the mid-30s Kim Il Sung had become the main leader of the resistance against Japan's brutal occupation of Korea and Manchuria.



Former Premier of North Korea
Kim Il-Sung (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Then came WWII (1939-1945), during which the Japanese were driven out of Korea and Manchuria. Korea was finally liberated from Japan's oppressive rule. By 1945 the people of Korea could finally start planning for their own governance, according to how they wanted to proceed as a society. Kim Il Sung, who was inspired by socialist concepts, had great support among the Korean people (except, of course, for those of the privileged aristocracy who had collaborated with the Japanese). Independent of Kim Il Sung's movement were indigenous "People's Committees" that developed throughout the southern parts of Korea. These "People's Committees" were local groups of workers (factory workers, e.g.) who organized themselves to run factories and farms in a cooperative, democratic way that respected the rights, dignity, and health of the workers. The People's Committee movement represented an alternative to the unjust social system that privileged the aristocracy/business class.

But, these early hopes of creating a new, free, independent, and just Korean society were smashed when the USA and its Allies, without any consultation with the Korean people (other than with members of the opportunistic aristocratic class that had shamelessly collaborated with Japan), divided Korea into North and South Korea at the 38th parallel. The USA occupied the South, while the Soviet Union was awarded the North. In the South, Japanese occupation was replaced by USA occupation. The USA soon installed the corrupt, unscrupulous Syngman Rhee as the leader of South Korea. In 1948 the Republic of Korea (ROK) was officially established, with Rhee at the helm. The Soviet Union had allowed Kim Il Sung to become the leader of North Korea—the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

From 1945-1950 the USA/Rhee regime conducted a reign of terror against the "People's Committees" that had spontaneously and indigenously developed throughout the southern parts of South Korea. The social ideas and plans of these committees represented an enormous threat to the capitalistic thinking and plans of the USA and privileged business elite of South Korea. Although these People's Committees had nothing to do with Kim Il Sung, Chinese communism, or Soviet communism, the USA considered these committees to be "communists" who must be rooted out. Factory workers who participated in the People's Committee movement were terrorized, often killed.

The reign of terror conducted by the USA/Rhee regime is best exemplified by the Cheju Insurgency in 1948-49. Cheju is an island off the southern coast of South Korea. In 1945 there were about 300,000 people living on the island. About two thirds of these 300,000 had a progressive “moderate leftist” approach to their social thinking. After WWII ended in 1945 the vast majority of the Cheju people favored the development of the People’s Committee movement as a way to organize social and work life on the island. The USA/Rhee regime saw this as a threatening development. The police force on the island was populated and controlled by the Rhee regime, and it deliberately colluded with ultra-rightist terrorists to oppress and destroy the People’s Committee movement—all with the full knowledge of the USA. The USA helped Rhee to develop a Counter-Intelligence Corp (CIC) and a right wing Northwest Youth Corps (NWY), which was a fascist youth group. The CIC and the NWY were mobilized to terrorize and “reorient” supporters of the People’s Committee movement. Those who resisted “reorientation” were killed, usually brutally.

The NWY reportedly “disemboweled pregnant women, ran bayonets through little kids, burned down people’s homes, and smashed open the brains of opponents.” Women were “serially raped, often in front of villagers, and then blown up with a grenade in the vagina.” These atrocities occurred with the full knowledge of the USA/Rhee regime. They were part of a deliberate terror campaign against the People’s Committee movement.

Understandably, in 1948 the people of Cheju Island rose up to resist this pathological violence. They rebelled, primarily against the police. The USA/Rhee regime responded with a massive counter-insurgency campaign, even bringing back Japanese officers and soldiers to help root out the insurgents. Villages were indiscriminately burned and destroyed; civilians were massacred. By August 1949 the insurgency (the People’s Committee movement) had been eradicated, much to the delight of the USA/Rhee regime. More than 70% of the island’s villages had been burned. It is estimated that 30,000-60,000 islanders were killed, many of them butchered. Another 40,000 islanders fled the country, for safety. After the defeat of the People’s Committee movement, Cheju Island was run by the CIC and the NWY, who continued to treat the remaining islanders with contempt and cruelty.

This USA-directed reign of terror (throughout South Korea, not just on Cheju Island) took place from 1945-49, before the Korean War even started (in 1950). During that reign of terror approximately 100,000 South Korean people (mostly progressive leftist-thinking people) were killed by USA/Rhee forces.

That brings us to 1950, when the Korean War began. By 1950 South Korea was controlled by the USA/Rhee regime. Most of the leaders of South Korea were former collaborators with Japan. In fact, by 1950 the USA had enlisted Japan as an ally in its war against North Korea. By 1950 the USA/Rhee regime had ruthlessly eliminated the People’s Committee movement throughout South Korea. Now it was time to eliminate the “communists” in North Korea, who were led by Kim Il Sung. Who actually “fired the first shot” is a matter of controversy. Early in 1950 North Korea appeared to be prevailing over the South Korean Army. This alarmed the USA and prompted the sending of American troops to Korea—to heroically save the Korean people (and the rest of Asia) from communism.

Once the USA entered the Korean War in 1950 it set out to totally destroy North Korea. The USA carpet-bombed North Korea with virtually no concern for civilian casualties. 32,000 tons of napalm were dropped on the North Korean people. Whole cities were demolished. 75% of Pyongyang was leveled. The USA threatened several times to drop nuclear bombs on North

Korea, and terrorized North Korea by deliberately sending lone B-29 bombers on simulated atomic bomb runs, during which they dropped “dummy” atomic bombs (heavy TNT bombs). Each time, the North Koreans would be unsure whether these planes were going to drop a real atomic bomb (as the USA had needlessly dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) or just a dummy.

The USA would have prevailed over North Korea were it not for China’s intervention (under Mao Tse Tung). A stalemate eventually occurred, and an Armistice Agreement was signed in 1953 to cease hostilities and create the demilitarized zone (DMZ). This Armistice represented only a cease-fire agreement, not a peace treaty or an official end to the war. The Korean War was never officially ended. It has continued in a suspended state ever since. The USA has preferred it that way, because it justifies American bases in South Korea and allows the USA to continually pose as an existential threat to North Korea.

It is extremely relevant, today, that the USA/South Korea has continued (since 1953) to intermittently send lone B29 bombers on simulated bomb runs near North Korea (without dropping “dummy” bombs), just to remind North Korea that the USA could annihilate North Korea with a nuclear bomb whenever it chooses. North Korea has never been able to relax in this regard. It has needed to stay vigilant. It has felt an appropriate need to develop protection from an American first strike.

So, that is a brief history of Korea, before, during, and after the Korean War. If accurate, it raises the question of who the “good guys” were/are. According to the USA, the people who were attracted to the Peoples Committee movement were the bad guys—so bad that they needed to be terrorized and killed, by the thousands. According to the USA, the “communists” in North Korea were the bad guys, including Kim Il Sung, who had led the resistance against the ruthless Japanese reign of terror (1910-1939). According to the USA, Rhee was a good guy, as were the other financially and politically powerful South Korean elite, most of whom had collaborated with the Japanese during Japan’s brutal occupation of Korea and Manchuria. According to the USA, the ruthless CIC and the fascist NWY were the good guys on Cheju Island.

Understandably, the North Korean people who support Kim Il Sung do not see the USA as the good guys. Understandably, they fear and distrust the USA.

Today, the American people still assume (as they did in 1950) that the USA was on the right side of history in 1950 and has been on the right side ever since. And, they assume that North Korea was (in 1950) an evil empire and has been ever since. According to the American understanding, North Korea is one of the most evil, if not the most evil, countries on earth. It is viewed as a ruthless dictatorship, in which there are no freedoms, no human rights—only suffering, starvation, fear, torture, and death (for those who dissent). The perception is that the Korean people’s adoration of Kim Jong Un (and his father and grandfather) is due to either brainwashing, fear, delusion, or combinations of these. It is thought that Kim Jong Un is dangerously deranged and deluded and represents an existential threat to the USA.

If the above history of Korea is accurate, and if we try to think from North Korea’s point of view, we are likely to conclude that instead of waging a nuclear war to annihilate the North Korean people, the USA should, at the very least, critically examine its behavior in Korea over the past 72 years. At the very least, the American people should consider hypotheses about North Korea that differ from the US narrative that Americans have unquestioningly

accepted.

Instead of ignorantly dropping nuclear bombs on North Korea, without taking a complete history or testing any hypotheses, maybe it would be better to not only critically review the above history, but also consider the following hypothesis about North Korea:

Hypothesis: Maybe, somehow, the North Korean people, as a group, have deeply grasped and are appreciatively practicing a highly evolved concept of Natural Duty that Jose Marti, Che Guevara, and Victor Hugo advocated—a concept that most Americans know little about and many have never experienced.

At the very heart of the social philosophy of Jose Marti, Che Guevara, and Victor Hugo is the concept that the “real aim in life” is to follow the path of Natural Duty, and that the greatest satisfactions in life stem from following that path—from “being on Duty,” being available and being able to help our fellow human beings. By “Duty,” Marti, Guevara and Hugo meant physician-like Duty; not an onerous contrived guilt-driven duty, but an exhilarating Natural Duty. They suggested that we celebrate and enjoy the fact that a huge part of Human Nature is a natural, free flowing, brimming capacity and desire to follow the path of Natural Duty—the path of looking after others. Good physicians regularly experience the uplifting meaningfulness of being on duty. They appreciate the privilege of being trained and given the opportunity to provide health care. Good physicians are not motivated by an onerous sense of obligation, imposed from within and/or without, that “forces” them to help patients; Good physicians are naturally inclined to compassionately help patients; it is part of the natural flow of their hearts, minds, and lives. The experience of being on duty brings meaning and satisfaction to their lives, and they are appreciative that Medicine has afforded them an opportunity to practice the very best of their human nature.

Maybe the North Korean people have been helped to understand and practice this concept of Natural Duty. Maybe they are willingly devoted to the Marti-Guevara-Hugo concept of Natural Duty because they have recognized that participation in such Duty is the most satisfying experience in life. Maybe the North Korean people have grasped the concept of Natural Duty to a greater, fuller extent than has any society on earth, perhaps even in History.

Maybe the North Korean people have somehow figured out that participation in vast Public Activity (including a free public health care system, free public education, and a completely Public Economy that is designed to meet Human needs, rather than to make profit) leads to far greater satisfaction and far greater collective human spirit than does participation in capitalism.

Maybe the North Korean people, including their leaders, have focused on creating vast opportunities for people to discover and practice the real aim of life, which is devotion to Natural Duty, devotion to caring for others—and have found this to be a far more satisfying approach to life, individually and collectively, than becoming entrepreneurs or being exploited by entrepreneurs.

Maybe the North Koreans, each in their own way, have learned to appreciate “being on duty” in the same way that devoted physicians and nurses have learned how uplifting and satisfying and freeing it is to be “on duty” to help their fellow human beings.

Maybe the North Koreans have figured out what the Cheju People’s Committees intuitively

understood—that it is more satisfying to look after each other than to look after one’s self—that following the path of Natural Duty is more uplifting than following the path of self-interest.

What a beautiful thought—to have an entire society made up of people who fully grasp and enthusiastically practice the concept of Natural Duty (of “being on duty”) that was suggested by Marti-Guevara-Hugo and has been exemplified by so many devoted physicians, nurses, and teachers world-wide, for many decades.

Maybe when the North Korean people are seen in mass demonstrations of homage to their leaders, they are really paying homage and giving thanks to the concept of Natural Duty that they have learned and have been given ample opportunity to practice. Maybe they primarily view their leader as a symbol and protectorate of the concept of Natural Duty. Maybe they particularly appreciate the fact that Kim Il Sung, caring enough to risk his life to resist the brutal Japanese and American occupations, proceeded to develop a society that is based on Natural Duty and creates vast Public Activity for its practice. Maybe they appreciate Kim Jong Un’s commitment to protecting and perpetuating that society.

Maybe the North Korean people feel wonderfully free, precisely because of their understanding and practice of Natural Duty. Maybe that understanding has resulted in their being as self-motivated and altruistic as our best physicians, nurses, and teachers—who do not need to be told or forced to do what their natural inclinations and natural compassion guide them to do.



Maybe North Korea is, thereby, the most free, loving, compassionate, enthusiastic, and emotionally healthy society on earth.

North Korean kids

And, maybe, too, the North Korean people are appropriately fearful that the USA intends to ruthlessly annihilate them, as they tried to do during the Korean War years of 1950-53. Maybe the North Koreans fear that American-directed fascists, like those on Cheju Island, will serially rape their women, then blow them up with grenades in their vaginas. After all, the USA has committed such heinous crimes many times before. And now an ignorant racist American Commander-in-Chief, like the ignorant, racist American Commander-in-Chief during the Korean War era, is threatening to attack North Korea “with fire and fury like the world has never seen before.” Maybe North Korea believes that possession, or at least the threat of possible possession, of a nuclear deterrent is the only way to protect themselves from a ruthlessness that the USA has exhibited many times over, not only before and during the Korean War, but in dozens of countries since.

The American hypothesis is that North Korea is the most evil and oppressive society on earth, run by a ruthless dictator—a society in which the people have no freedom, are brainwashed, live in fear, and worship their leaders with either deluded loyalty or fear for their lives.

Which hypothesis is closer to the truth? Which country is the greater threat to humankind and the environment? Which people understand the real aim of life? Which people have the best understanding of Natural Duty and the importance of it? Which country is on the right track?

Maybe the American hypothesis is closer to the truth. Maybe the above-recounted history of Korea is inaccurate. Maybe the truth is somewhere in-between these two hypotheses and between the above history and the accepted American narrative. But, the point is, we do not really know, because we have not critically examined the history of Korea or either hypothesis. A good physician does not prescribe dangerous chemotherapy “for cancer” without first taking a history and proving the hypothesis that the patient truly has cancer. That would be malpractice. And, yet, the USA is threatening to “nuke” a North Korean “cancer” without taking an accurate history and without testing its own or any other hypotheses about North Korea.

Rather than drop nuclear bombs on North Korea, should we not, first, study history and test the above hypotheses? That is what physicians do. That is how physicians learn; that is how physicians correct mistakes and avoid making further mistakes.

The American people owe it to the North Koreans, to Humanity, and to the Earth itself, to take a complete history of the Korean War and think from North Korea’s point of view, as opposed to thinking only from the American point of view and perpetuating narratives about Korea that may not be true.

Note

¹The history summarized in this essay is based predominantly on Bruce Cumings’ excellently written and thoroughly annotated book, *The Korean War: A History*, published by Modern Library in 2011.

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