

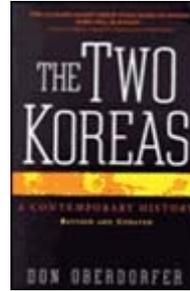
When the Smoke Clears ...

Two Koreas: A Contemporary History

by Don Oberdorfer

Addison-Wesley

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Review by Peter W. Chung (Summer 1998 issue)

Two Koreas is an enlightening and masterful effort at describing the complex history of the Korean peninsula. Beginning with the early dynasties, it weaves an intricate and artful picture of the state of the two Koreas today by recounting the causal policy making, or lack thereof, of the U.S., Russia, China, North Korea, and of course, South Korea. Instead of the kind of listmaking typical of historical accounts, Two Koreas presents a personable review of the events of the early history of Korea with greater emphasis on the half century since World War II.

There is one key attribute that makes this book so appealing. It's American author maintains a refreshing degree of objectivity in describing events on the peninsula, which tend to be reported in a sensational and biased manner in other accounts. From the Kwangju uprisings to the more recent nuclear issues, it becomes clear that no party is truly innocent of bad decision making in the perpetual crisis state the two Koreas have maintained for nearly 50 years. It makes clear that the intention of the U.S. policymakers today is to preserve peace while making indirect retributions for the ill-fated decisions of F.D.R. and Stalin to split the peninsula at the 38th parallel after World War II.

Similarly, the Soviet Union and China are described as regretting their sponsorship of the Korean War from the northern side, and as parties still attempting to maintain an obligatory brotherly role for a fellow communist country.

Also evident in the book is the provincial and short-sighted decisions made by both North and South Korea. Their fiery attitudes towards one another appear to be more based on personality clashes of chief politicians rather than purer ideological differences which brings into question the legitimacy of the rationale for having two countries and two governments.

Also of great interest to any reader are the dynamic relationships between the involved countries. Two Koreas digs into the personalities and motivations of various contemporaneous leaders who have had roles to play over the course of history. One prominent observable fact is the narcissism and political posturing shown by both former South Korean president Kim Young Sam and the late North Korean leader Kim Il Sung. For example, it is arguable that Kim Young Sam may have single-handedly undermined one possible path to reunification by remaining obstinate to pleas by the North for humanitarian aid during the onset of the present North Korean famine. His desire to see the reunification of the two countries "during his watch" may have influenced him

against opening dialogue for more aid to the atrophying north, believing that the north would soon fall if minimal aid was provided while he was still in office.

While the emergency aid/reunification dispute was ongoing, Kim was also attempting to defend his administration from attacks for allegedly accepting money from the now infamous “slush-fund” scandal.

Likewise, Kim Il Sung made it his policy always to deny any instigating role in the start of the Korean War. Later, however, after the fall of the communist Soviet Union, previously unavailable documented evidence proved that Kim Il Sung played a large role in starting the war. In both cases, Narcissus would certainly cringe.

In light of the recent nuclear testing by India and Pakistan and the subsequent condemnation by all of the major world powers - U.S., China, and the former Soviet Union - the threat of a nuclear holocaust seminated by third world countries seems a more imminent threat than that which emanates from the nuclear-armed major world powers. It then becomes apparent that countries such as Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and North Korea are to play an important role as the remaining non-democratic/non-capitalistic survivors of the Cold War. Now, differences in ideologies take back seats to other issues such as the global economic markets, racial purification, land disputes, and the ever-increasing popularity of autocratic rule. North Korea, in particular, through its relationships with the former Soviet Union, China, the United States, and South Korea, is ever expanding its political network, an attitude which is counter to its *juche* or self-sufficient ideology of the early '60s and '70s.

South Korea, on the other hand, has been crippled by previous administrations' irresponsible economic planning, leading to the \$60 billion bailout package from the IMF in late 1997. Only time will tell how these two scripts will play themselves out, but one thing is for sure, at all costs both militaries (irrespective of the opinions of their governments), seem to want to avoid a second civil war.

Two Koreas also presents an intriguing and disturbing picture of the personality cults that both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il have constructed for themselves. The frequent mind-numbing two-faced lies that are printed and perpetuated from school yards to offices demonstrate the inadequacy of the present socialistic/autocratic government when left to its own devices.

Two Koreas is edifying and insightful. Readers with or without background knowledge of the peninsula's history will find this book enjoyable. Though a little slow at first, when completed, it opens up a whole new informed outlook of the present situations in the far east, the roles other governments have played in creating these situations, and perhaps, what directions must be taken in the future to ultimately resolve them.