



The Three Enduring Legacies of the Pacific War in East Asia

By Cheol Hee Park

The Pacific War left deep footprints in East Asia. Though 75 years have passed since the war ended, East Asia is still not free from its legacies. This is especially the case across three specific issues in which the Pacific War maintains a strong hold over the fates of millions and the geopolitics of the region.

The first lasting legacy of the Pacific War is the continued division of the Korean Peninsula, which had previously been undivided. Korea was colonized by Japan in 1910, but was not involved in any of the major battles of the Pacific War. At the Potsdam Conference in July and August 1945, Stalin and

Truman agreed that Soviet troops would occupy the northern portion of the Korean peninsula while American forces would occupy the south. The Soviet Union waited until August 8th 1945 to declare war in Japan, but wasted no time in pouring more than 1,000,000 soldiers into Japanese-occupied Manchuria. Soon, thousands of Soviet troops rushed into the Korean peninsula and began to occupy the northern part of the peninsula. Concerned that the Soviets would attempt to occupy the entire peninsula, two young American Army officers—including future Secretary of State Dean Rusk—were assigned to define the dividing line between

the American and Soviet areas of occupation. Without consulting any experts on Korea—let alone Koreans themselves—they selected the 38th parallel primarily because it would keep the capital Seoul under American control. U.S. forces did not arrive until early September, but the division of the peninsula went mostly to plan.

Although the two great powers had previously agreed that their occupations would be temporary and that Korea would eventually decide on its own political future, both sides remained. For all intents and purposes, this marked the true beginning of the Cold War in Asia—long before it was recognized in Europe. Despite past commitments to conduct free elections across Korea, the Soviets held their own election in August 1948. However, the ballot only allowed voters to select the communists. Kim Il-sung was subsequently selected by Moscow to lead the newly-established DPRK. Meanwhile, the United States, together with an endorsement from the United Nations, helped the Rhee Syngman regime take root in South Korea.

The first battle of the Cold War came in the form of a confrontation between South and North Korea in 1950. The Korean War was seen by many as a chance to unite the nation again, but three horrific years of fighting and the intrusion of Chinese forces brought the fighting to an uneasy stalemate and, following the signing of the armistice in 1953, inaugurated a new era in which a divided Korea ensured that peace and stability would be forever uncertain.

The Cold War came to an end in 1989, with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet, the division of the Korean peninsula remains unchanged, a legacy of the Cold War and—ultimately—the Pacific War. Reflecting seismic shifts in the global security landscape, South Korean administrations began

adopting strong initiatives to dismantle Cold War structures on the Korean peninsula. The Roh Taewoo administration launched the so-called ‘Northern Policy’ with a view towards erasing the deep divide between South Korea and the former socialist bloc, including Russia and China. The Kim Daejung administration initiated a ‘sunshine policy,’ in hopes of embracing North Korea on the basis of facilitating inter-Korean cooperation. Conservative administrations led by Lee Myongbak and Park Geunhye also tried to improve ties with North Korea on the precondition that Pyongyang should denuclearize. All efforts ultimately ended in failure as North Korea continued to develop their own nuclear and long-range missile programs. If the Korean peninsula had not divided immediately after the Pacific War, East Asia’s security landscape would have been significantly different from its state today.

The second legacy of the Pacific War, which remains in place, is the development of the alliances between the United States, South Korea, and Japan. If the United States did not occupy Japan and South Korea immediately after the war, the security structure of East Asia would look quite different. There is no doubt that the Korean War provided a strategic opportunity to upgrade ties between Washington and its East Asian security allies. The United States signed mutual defense treaties with South Korea and Japan for the purpose of defending them from potential threats from the Soviet bloc. It was critical for the United States to make sure that its two East Asian allies flourished economically and remained a bulwark against the specter of communist expansion. The U.S. security presence in East Asia, spearheaded by military presence in Japan and South Korea, has likewise remained at the heart of peace and stability in East Asia in three notable ways.



First, U.S. security presence has been a strong deterrent preventing the reemergence of flashpoints in East Asia, including the Korean peninsula. Without U.S. forces in Japan and South Korea, the two countries would have no choice but to build up their own defense capabilities against immediate threats from North Korea, China, and Russia. Second, the American security presence awarded psychological comfort to South Korea and Japan so that they could invest more in developing their economies, both locally and globally. Third, U.S. security presence assuaged a potential security dilemma between South Korea and Japan. Because the two countries remained allied partners to the U.S., they did not feel directly threatened or challenged by each other. Even today, the U.S. security commitment to both Japan and South Korea acts as a firewall that can prevent the rapid spread of diplomatic feuds between the two countries.

The third enduring legacy of the Pacific War in East Asia is the unresolved burden of history. Historical and territorial controversies between South Korea and Japan persist even now. The San Francisco Peace Treaty, which established the postwar order in the region, dealt with the relationship between the victor, that is to say the United States and allied countries, and the defeated, Japan. Defining new relations between Japan as aggressor and the former occupied countries (and its immediate neighbors) including South Korea and China was left for them to negotiate between themselves. In other words, the San Francisco Treaty left the thorny issues between the regional aggressor, Japan, and the victimized nations, like South Korea, relatively untouched. The challenge of developing friendly ties between Japan, on the one hand, and South Korea and China, on the other, was left to the regional countries and not pursued under the umbrella of any regional institutional or collective arrangement.

When security concerns prevailed as they did during the Cold War, historical and territorial contentions remained minimal. For example, one reason for South Korea and Japan to finally agree to normalize their relationship in 1965 was China's successful test of a nuclear weapon the year before, which catalyzed both Tokyo and Seoul to take security threats seriously and drove the United States to put more pressure on both sides to reconcile. However, voices of victims, especially in South Korea, grew louder after 1989. Diplomatic struggles between South Korea and Japan started in early 1990s and still remain unresolved. Unfortunately, the root of the controversies stem in part from the legal and institutional arrangement to end the Pacific War in East Asia.

As the San Francisco Treaty focused more on ending the U.S. occupation of Japan in light of a rapidly developing Cold War situation in East Asia, restructuring the ties between the U.S. and Japan stood as a top priority. The peace treaty between the U.S. and Japan is intertwined with the simultaneous development of a security treaty between the two countries. Embracing Japan as a peaceful and friendly security partner for the United States was at the heart normalizing relations between the two countries. Forgotten during this process, however, was how to comprehensively connect the two U.S. security partners across East Asia. Setting up security ties with both Japan and South Korea to form a circle of mutually defending partners remained a priority concern of the U.S. policymakers. Yet in the strategic mindset of the political leaders at that time, a vision to build an open and connected regional partnership like that in Europe was lacking. So long as a hub and spoke system worked with the United States at the center, broken ties between two key allies were of secondary concern.



Due to the underdevelopment of regional ties, nationalism survived strongly. Especially after the end of the Cold War, when the sense of immediate threat from the socialist bloc weakened, nationalism in South Korea and Japan reemerged to the surface. South Korean victims pursued the goal of recovering self-esteem and restoring respect that had been sacrificed during the colonial period. They began to reinterpret the relationship between the aggressor and the victim. In Japan, voices calling for the resurrection of national pride and self-esteem grew in the form of denying its disgraceful history during the war and colonial era. These two different stands of history revisionism in South Korea and Japan are constantly colliding each other without the chance of finding a reasonable compromise solution between the two.

The memory of the Pacific War is diminishing as time goes by. However, the structures established in East Asia after the Pacific War have not faded away. On the contrary, how to conserve and preserve the successful legacy of ending the Pacific War remains a daunting challenge in the region. The division of the Korean peninsula may not necessarily be an uncomfortable reality for surrounding countries, but the divided two Koreas remains an insurmountable and ever-present burden for Korean themselves. How to dismantle the Cold War structure on the Korean peninsula and establish a structure of peace and cooperation remains a never-ending challenge for the two Koreas. U.S. security presence in East Asia still serves as a cornerstone of peace and stability in the entire region.

President Trump, based on a transactional approach to the alliance, sometimes raises doubts as to the continuation of the allied partnership of the present form. However, the real value of the alliance cannot be quantified by dollars and cents

alone. Much more important is the value of trust and a commitment to co-defend democratic and market systems. How to overcome unnecessary rifts between the United States and its two East Asian allies remains a challenge. In addition, the burden of history between Japan and South Korea may remain a challenge in coming years. History and identity issues are not all that matters in furthering relations. Nevertheless, bypassing the issue is hardly an ideal path. South Korea and Japan should make utmost efforts to handle the burden of history from a strategic angle while also acknowledging the sensitivities of national pride and identity. Splitting the two U.S. allies because of historical and territorial controversies does not serve the interests of either country, nor does it serve the interests of the United States. The legacies of the Pacific War should be properly preserved while daunting challenges that still remain should be acknowledged, overcome, and upgraded in their importance to the future.

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