BROTHERS AT WAR

The Unending Conflict in Korea

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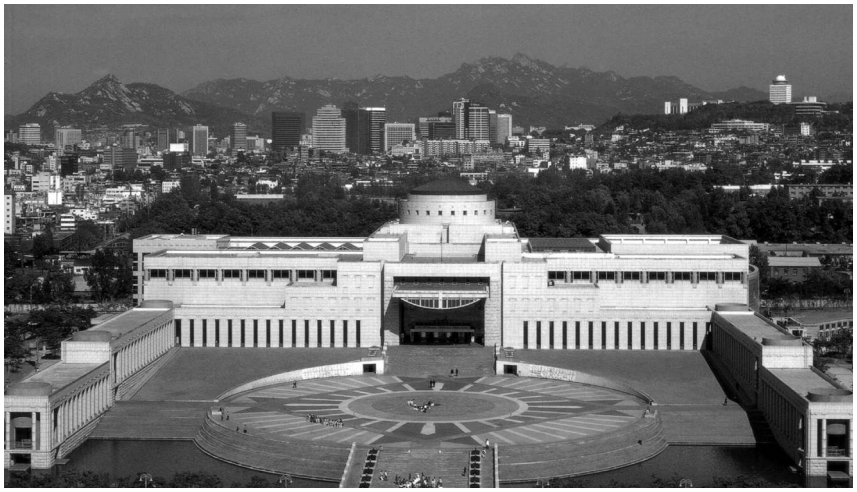

The War Memorial, Seoul. (PHOTO BY AUTHOR)

My interest in the Korean War began with a visit to a memorial. In the summer of 1996 my family relocated to South Korea when my husband, a U.S. Army officer, was assigned to work at the U.S. embassy in Seoul. Just a few minutes away from the main gate of the Yongsan U.S. Army base, where we lived, is the War Memorial, and over the next four years I made frequent trips to visit it. Ostensibly, it commemorates South Korea's military war dead, but other wartime events, including Korea's thirteenth-century struggles with the Mongols and sixteenth-century defense against the Japanese, are also represented in the exhibitions. Inclusion of these earlier conflicts appears to reinforce the idea that the Korean War was part of the nation's long history of righteous struggle against adversity—in this case, South Korea's struggle against

North Korean communists. Situated on five acres along a wide boulevard that bisects the army base, the War Memorial encompasses a rare, large open space in crowded Seoul. Originally conceived and planned under the No T'ae-u (Roh Tae-Woo) administration (1988–93), the complex opened its doors in 1994. It includes a museum as well as an outdoor exhibition area featuring tanks, airplanes, statues, and a small amusement area for children. It has become a popular destination for school field trips.

What struck me most about the memorial was the paradox of what it represented. How does one commemorate a war that technically is not over? While the Korean War, at least for Americans, "ended" in 1953, the meaning and memories of the war have not been brought to closure in Korean society because of the permanent division of the peninsula. How does one bring closure to a war for which the central narrative is one of division and dissent, a war whose history is still in the process of being made?

In South Korea, the official view of the Korean War has always had, unsurprisingly, an anti–North Korean character. One striking feature of the memorial, however, is the relative absence of depictions of the brutal struggle between the North and the South. Although its purported task is to memorialize the war, the main purpose of the memorial appears to be to promote reconciliation and peace. There are few exhibits of bloody battle scenes, but most conspicuously is the lack of any reference to known North Korean atrocities committed during the war. The successive purges of South Korean sympathizers after the North Korean People's Army occupied Seoul in June 1950 and the execution of prisoners of war are represented nowhere. Evidence of the widely publicized executions of an estimated five thousand South Korean civilians during the last days of the North Korean army's occupation of Taejŏn in September 1950—an event highlighted in the history books from previous South Korean military regimes—is also missing. For a war that was particularly remembered for its viciousness, the memorial seems to be promoting a tacit kind of forgetfulness. This is in sharp contrast to earlier representations of the conflict that proliferated during the cold war, when North Korean brutality played a central role in the story of the war.

It was not difficult to understand why this sudden shift in memory had occurred. By the time the memorial had opened its doors, the cold war

had ended and South Korea had come out on top. Following its global coming-out party during the 1988 Seoul Olympics, South Korea had clearly "won" the war against the North, but it could not afford to bask in its glory if it wanted to foster North-South rapprochement and the reunification of the peninsula. The memorial's designers were thus faced with the dilemma of how to memorialize a brutal war while at the same time leaving open the possibility for peninsular peace.

When I returned to the Memorial a decade later, the pendulum of politics in South Korea had swung sharply to the Right. The conservatives had gained power and opposed improving relations with the P'yŏngyang regime. I was in Seoul in 2006 when North Korea test-fired missiles, including a long-range Taep'odong-2 with the theoretical capacity to reach the continental United States. These acts of defiance were followed by the testing of North Korea's first nuclear device on October 9, 2006, and then again on May 25, 2009. South Koreans were furious. When the conservative presidential candidate Yi Myŏng-bak (Lee Myung-bak) assumed office in 2008, he abruptly renounced the policy of engagement with the North that previous administrations had pursued. The North responded with vitriolic attacks against the new South Korean government. Relations between the two Koreas spiraled downward from there. By then, it had become quite apparent that the Korean War would not end as optimistically as the War Memorial planners had hoped. Rather, the memorial itself had become part of the history of the war, one "phase" of its never-ending story.

That initial visit to the War Memorial in 1996 spurred me to think more closely about the war. Eventually, I made the memorial the subject of several essays and book chapters and then finally undertook a major research project on the Korean War itself. This entailed exploring the policies and actions of all the major players of the war, including the sixteen UN countries that sent troops to aid South Korea, the military history, and a wide variety of popular and academic writings about the conflict. But I never lost sight of my original fascination with the war and its continuing and evolving impact on the two Koreas and on the rest of the world.

Since the late nineteenth century, the Korean peninsula has been a focal point for confrontation and competition among the Great Powers. First China, then Japan, Russia, and the United States in succession, exerted some form of control over the peninsula. No other place in the

world has assumed such symbolic importance to these four countries. The Second World War, however, left only two Great Powers vying for influence over Korea: the United States and the Soviet Union (formerly Russia).

But by then the Koreans had already divided themselves into partisan camps under the tutelage, and with the support, of these two patrons. Two antagonistic regimes were born: communists in the North and conservatives in the South, each with dreams of reunifying the Korean peninsula under their rule, but without any means of achieving this ambition on their own. Their diverging visions of what kind of modern nation Korea was to become made the possibility of conciliation and unity increasingly remote and exploded into war in 1950.

The main issues over which the war was fought had their origins immediately after Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945. The division of the peninsula at the 38th parallel by the United States and the Soviet Union gave rise to a fractured polity whose political fault lines were exacerbated further by regional, religious (Christians versus communists), and class divisions. Open fighting among these groups eventually claimed more than one hundred thousand lives, all before the ostensible Korean War began. Prior to the founding of the Republic of Korea in August 1948, the Americans organized a constabulary force in their zone to augment the national police, primarily to conduct counterinsurgency operations against leftist guerillas. While the record of their operations remains controversial, the security forces successfully suppressed the insurgency by the spring of 1950. The decision by North Korea's leader, Kim Il Sung, with the backing of Joseph Stalin, to launch a conventional attack across the 38th parallel on June 25, 1950, thus resumed the fighting by other means.

The Korean War, in the midst of the rapidly developing cold war, reestablished China, now Communist China, as a Great Power, setting up a triangular struggle over the peninsula between the United States, the Soviet Union, and Communist China. The irresolution of the Korean War, owing to the lack of a peace treaty, with only a military armistice signed in 1953, stoked the fire of simmering confrontation and tension between North and South Korea as well as their Great Power overseers. But the most important fuel that kept the flame of confrontation alive was the implacable nature of the two Korean

regimes. This is all the more remarkable as Korea had been unified since the seventh century.

Today, the essentially continuous war between the Koreas threatens to reach beyond their borders, as North Korea continues to develop nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. How did we get to this point? This book is the story of Korean competition and conflict—and Great Power competition and conflict—over the peninsula: an unending war between two "brothers" with ramifications for the rest of the world. If a resolution to the conflict is ever to be found, this history must be understood and taken into account.

I develop two major but overlapping themes in this book. The first one emphasizes the evolution of the war through time. Because the Korean War technically ended in an armistice and not a peace treaty, it continued to influence regional events even though the significance of the war dramatically changed. Hence, the conflict evolved from a civil war in 1948–49 to an international war from June 1950 to 1953, to a global cold war after 1953, only to undergo yet another transformation in the late 1960s, when the focus of the conflict was no longer on containing communism per se, but ensuring the region's stability. By the mid-1970s, the stalemated Korean War kept American forces in South Korea because the conflict had ironically become a source of regional stability during a period of significant changes in Asia: Sino-American rapprochement, the Sino-Soviet split, and increasing Sino-Vietnamese tensions. Although the Korean War continued to be waged as a series of "local wars" along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) dividing the North from the South, the nature of the conflict had fundamentally changed since the armistice. In the post–cold war period, the Korean War was defined by a series of crises over the North Korean nuclear weapons program and the potential collapse of the North. Should fighting ever resume on the Korean peninsula, it will not resemble the first phase of the war. No one will mistake another North Korean attack on the South as a communist challenge or a war by proxy.

As much as the war has transformed over the years, it has also stayed very much the same. By titling this book *Brothers at War*, I highlight the second major theme: the continuous struggle between North and South Korea for the mantle of Korean legitimacy. It was this competition, after all, that had given rise to Kim Il Sung's ambition to reunify