

The Cold War in Northeast Asia

By Eric Cunningham

Although the Cold War began in 1945 as an argument between the United States and the Soviet Union over the administration of recently liberated European states, it rapidly became a large-scale ideological war involving every region of the world. The titanic clash between American-style democracy and Soviet communism always determined the abstract contours of the Cold War, but in the sites where the struggle was concretely fought—the Middle East, Latin America, and Northeast Asia—the Cold War was never as orderly as its superpower managers envisioned it, nor were the goals of nations in the contested regions exclusively aligned with the ideological aims of their superpower patrons. The visible ideological front of this bipolar conflict concealed numerous changes taking place in dependent states: the rise of new economic systems, new modes of national identity, new philosophical worldviews, new forms of international violence, and a wide variety of postcolonial cultural aspirations. By the end of nearly five decades of ideological strife, the world had changed so much that the apparent goal of each superpower—world hegemony—had become irrelevant, as was perhaps, the very concept of superpower. The dependent regions, for their parts, emerged from the Cold War with an unexpected degree of relevance and were able to claim validity as autonomous centers of a newly multi-polar world. This article will look at one region, Northeast Asia, and provide an overview of the Cold War trajectories of the nations in that region, as well as some thoughts on how the dynamics of the Cold War brought them to their respective positions in the “new world order” of the present day.

FRAMING THE COLD WAR

As tempting as it is to view the Cold War as merely a nuclear grudge match between two superpowers, it is helpful to expand our vision to include a consideration of the Cold War as a transitional period between the “New Imperialism” of the high modern age, and today’s era of global capitalism.¹ As the intermediate stage on an arc of modern global power, the Cold War shares characteristics with both its antecedent and successor stages. With the former, it shares—from the standpoint of the dominant power—an emphasis on nationalism, as well as military and economic control through superior technology. With the latter, it shares the practice of managing client states through the creation of financial and commercial interdependence, as well as the dubious expectation that ideological persuasion can replace open violence in dealings with non-clients. From the standpoint of the dependent societies, the nuanced differences between these stages of power may be laughably unimportant—for the colonized, it may not matter that the people who are destroying one’s village life, commandeering one’s economy, and manipulating one’s political system call themselves “The East India Company,” “the CIA,” or “Old Navy.” It is important to recognize that from the perspective of world history, and despite the assertions of many contemporary historians and political scientists, these historical modes of power are distinct from one another—certainly distinct enough to withstand categorization as mere “imperialism.” If we recognize this, we may also recognize that the Cold War is the stage that made possible the present organization of global

power. Within a century, the world moved from multi-polar imperialism to multi-polar post-colonialism, passing through the bi-polarity of the Cold War on the way. Let us then consider the Cold War as a period in which old-world empires were finally dismantled, and provisional superpowers such as America and Russia, while trying to wrestle the nations of the world into their respective camps, only succeeded in creating conditions for the emergence of new societies that were able to shake off superpower control. While we have yet to see the outcomes of global capitalism, we can see that nations of the so-called second and third worlds played as important a historical role in bringing us into the present age as did the superpowers themselves.

THE COLD WAR COMES TO NORTHEAST ASIA

The rationale for expanding the Cold War internationally was provided by President Harry Truman (1884–1972) in the so-called “Truman Doctrine.” The Doctrine, set forth in 1947 as a response to Soviet intervention in Greece and Turkey, articulates the policy of “containment,” which sought to stop the spread of communism by confining it to those nations where it already existed. The policy also pledged economic and military support to free nations threatened by communist aggression. The logic of containment defined the goals and informed the execution of virtually every American foreign policy decision from 1945 to 1990, and provided a template for dealing with world crises. When war broke out on the Korean peninsula in 1950, containment became a global enterprise.

KOREA

At the end of World War II, American and Soviet leaders chose the 38th parallel as a dividing line between their respective zones of occupation in liberated Korea. The leaders of the Soviet-backed Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea), and the American-backed Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), each desired an eventual reunification of the peninsula, but neither side was willing to accept the other's vision of unification. In June 1950, with tacit approval of the USSR, North Korean troops made a swift attack into the South, pushing ROK defenders all the way to the southern coast. Condemning North Korea's aggression and its refusal to withdraw from the ROK, the United Nations approved sending a multi-nation force into Korea to restore the status quo. At the time of this particular vote, the Soviet Union, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, was boycotting the United Nations because of its refusal to recognize the People's Republic of China. This enabled the Security Council to act quickly on Korea, as it is almost certain that the USSR would have boycotted the resolution calling for military intervention. As American-led UN forces threatened not only to expel DPRK troops from the South, but to advance into North Korea as well, millions of Chinese "volunteers" swarmed into North Korea, turning the war into a long and bloody stalemate.² A 1953 truce re-established the border and created a demilitarized zone (DMZ) near the 38th parallel. From this point forward, the history of Korea is the story of two very different states.

North Korea had been more heavily industrialized than the South under Japanese rule, and was thus the more prosperous of the two Koreas into the 1960s. Under the dictatorship of "Great Leader" Kim Il-sung (1912–1994), North Korea remained belligerent towards the United States; this does *not* imply that it was an obedient or even cooperative client of the Soviet Union or Communist China. While nominally a Marxist state, the DPRK followed a course of self-reliance informed by *juche*, an ideology of radical diplomatic and political independence based upon the personality cult of Great Leader Kim. Accordingly, while North Korea did much to frustrate American Cold War objectives, including assassinating South Korean leaders and kidnapping Japanese citizens—even seizing a US Navy warship (USS *Pueblo*) in 1968—it was an unpredictable, even reckless member of the so-called Eastern Bloc. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, North Korea has maintained its hostility to the West, so much so that one could argue that the Cold War is still being waged there.

South Korea, after the truce, failed to live up to the democratic expectations of its American liberators. President Syngman Rhee (1875–1965) was a rigid authoritarian whose abuses of power led to chronic dissatisfaction in the ROK. Civil unrest culminated in a 1961 coup, an event that the United States seemed to endorse. The new South Korean president, General Park Chung-hee (1917–1979), swiftly imposed martial law, even as he moved to consolidate American support for his regime. Pursuing an agenda that espoused anti-communism and vigorous economic growth, Park gained the acceptance of the State Department, which saw his regime as a bulwark against communism in East Asia. Park capitalized on his guarded support from the United States, using it to shore up the wary tolerance of his own people, and he succeeded in bringing order and prosperity to South Korea. By the time of his assassination in 1979, "President for Life" Park had guided the ROK surely, if heavy-handedly, to a position of political and economic strength in East Asia, and dominance on the Korean peninsula.

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Harry S. Truman giving Truman Doctrine address, March 12, 1947. Image source: The Truman Library Web site at <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/photographs/displayimage.php?pointer=14687>.

After Park's death, South Korea suffered a series of political convulsions, and it seemed during the 1980s that the ROK might become an even more oppressive military dictatorship. Fortunately, South Korean democracy had evolved to the point that combined pressure from students and the middle class moved the government to hold free elections in 1987. By the early 1990s, it appeared that South Korea had navigated more or less safely from authoritarian military rule into a regime of constitutional law.

JAPAN

From the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, through the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, the single focus of US concern in the East Asian region was the destruction of Japanese military forces. Immediately after the war, the primary goal of the American government was to render Japan permanently incapable of waging war. To this end, American Occupation forces under the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers (SCAP), General Douglas MacArthur (1880–1964) initiated a comprehensive program of demilitarization and democratization, including reforms of the economic, educational, and political structures, and the promulgation of a democratic constitution with a clear anti-war clause. Between 1945 and 1950, there was no long-term American plan to make Japan a strategic ally; indeed, it was a point of US policy that keeping Japan militarily and economically weak was the best way to guarantee regional stability.

This thinking changed completely between 1949 and 1951, as communist victory in the Chinese civil war and the outbreak of hostilities in Korea led SCAP officials and conservative Japanese leaders, such as Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru (1878–1967), to rethink Japan's strategic potential. Within several years, the Korean War proved to be,

as Yoshida remarked, Japan's "gift from the gods," as occupied Japan became a thriving logistics base for American forces in East Asia. Renewable security treaties and strong economic cooperation between the United States and Japan reinforced the strategic alliance between these former enemies, and brought Japan two decades of uninterrupted economic growth. So strong was the friendship between Japan and the US that American ambassador Mike Mansfield could declare with wide consensus that the US-Japanese alliance was the most important bilateral relationship in the world, "bar none."

It has been argued that Japan owes its success as a postwar economic giant to the patronage of the United States and the presence of American bases, which both unburdened Japan of the need to spend tax revenues on defense, and provided a large population of Japanese with disposable incomes. While it is certain that Japan's economic and political stability owe much to American power, the Japanese "economic miracle" was caused by a wide array of political, social, and cultural factors. As the exemplar of a new paradigm for economic success, the "Developmental State," Japan became a model for self-determining capitalist powers such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore.³ The Developmental State concept was neither "imposed upon" nor "created by" the economies of Northeast Asia, but rather emerged as a unique product of the historical conditions created by the Cold War.

CHINA AND TAIWAN

Given its enormous population, landmass, and resources, it seems hard to believe that China was not more of a concern to the superpowers in the wake of World War II. By far the weakest of the Allies militarily, Nationalist China under the Guomindang (GMD) regime was seen by many American wartime leaders as a greater burden than asset in the struggle against Japan. Throughout the war, GMD president Chiang Kai Shek (1887–1975) seemed more interested in preparing his forces for a resumption of the long-standing civil war against communism than in eliminating the Japanese from the China-Burma-India Theater. The atomic bombings in Japan came as a surprise to Chiang, and the end of the war caught him without concrete plans for reunifying China. Meanwhile, troops of the Soviet Red Army sweeping into Manchuria helped liberate northern China, and aided the communist forces under Mao Zedong (1893–1976) with contributions of weapons and ammunition captured from retreating Japanese.

The State Department underestimated the strategic importance of China. Despite their insistence on rebuilding Europe and re-inventing Japan, American leaders became extremely frustrated with the China situation, as attempts to engineer an accord between Mao and Chiang repeatedly failed. General George Marshall (1880–1959) declared China an unsalvageable problem and recommended the withdrawal of American troops after 1947. In 1949, after communist forces finally routed the Nationalist army and sent the remnants of the GMD fleeing into Taiwan, Mao proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China. The emergence of the first large and autonomous communist state in Northeast Asia was a grim portent for many Western Cold Warriors who feared that the "domino" theory of successive state-to-state communist revolutions would turn East Asia "red."

The GMD government of Taiwan was a thorn in Mao's side for the rest of his life, as it is today with the present leadership of the PRC. Throughout the Cold War, the Chiang regime maintained its defiant opposition to communism, its authoritarian rule, and its belief that it, not the PRC, was the only legitimate Chinese government. As we have noted in the case of the Korean War, the question of which China

should be recognized on the UN Security Council was the source of ongoing controversy among Mao and the superpowers. The matter was resolved, though certainly not to the satisfaction of Taiwan, in 1971, when the United Nations awarded China's seat in the Assembly to the PRC. In 1972, the US also affirmed a "one-China" policy, but also sells defensive weapons to, and maintains quasi-diplomatic relations with, Taiwan. For the last four decades, Taiwan has been an economically strong, militarily capable, and increasingly democratic power, albeit one not recognized diplomatically by most of the nations of the world. It remains to be seen what will be the outcome of Taiwan's troubled independence.

The creation of the PRC forced the State Department to question whether the US had been too hasty in its retreat from China. It is worth noting that in 1949 the PRC leaders were less interested in communist world hegemony than in trying to rebuild their nation after decades of GMD mismanagement, Japanese conquest, and civil war. Thus, it is probably safe to say that "Red China," as it was known in the West, did not play an aggressive role as an ideological superpower. Nevertheless, China was an active force in the Cold War, and its development profoundly influenced policy in the United States and the Soviet Union. As we have seen, the mobilization of millions of Chinese troops kept the Korean peninsula divided, and Mao's persistent vilification of the United States during and after the Korean War sharpened American public perceptions of a worldwide communist threat. The most hawkish positions of American anti-communists—left and right—were rooted in the awareness of China's capacity to determine the balance of power in Asia. With Marxist states controlling the world from Central Europe to the Pacific Ocean, many free world leaders wondered if their darkest fears had come to pass.

As it turned out, despite some degree of mutual admiration on the parts of Mao and Stalin, China and the Soviet Union were anything but united in their geopolitical vision. The USSR had nurtured Marxism in China during the 1920s, and Mao took advantage of Soviet military, technological, and economic aid, but like Kim in North Korea, he was never a subservient junior partner to the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, Josef Stalin's death in 1953, and USSR leader Nikita Khrushchev's later denunciation of Stalin, came as a shock to Mao, who feared that post-mortem disgrace might be his own legacy. Impelled in part by this anxiety, Mao attempted to consolidate his power and his historical reputation by re-igniting revolutionary fervor several times during the 1950s and 1960s. As evidence, we can cite The Hundred Flowers campaign of 1958 that went from a celebration to a suppression of intellectual life; the Great Leap Forward (1959–1962), an attempt to industrialize China on the backs of peasantry that cost over twenty million lives; and, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1965–1970), an ideological and generational civil crisis that succeeded in sparking the revolutionary spirit of the young generation that led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and the complete disruption of civil order.⁴ Each of these "mini" revolutions allowed Mao to recapture relevance by trumping the aspirations of his more cautious associates, men such as Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), who during the 1950s advocated political stability and steady economic progress. By characterizing stable progressivism as a deviant "capitalist road," Mao was able to redefine himself as the true father of the revolution and reclaim the loyalty of the masses. Unfortunately, these colossal and bloody failures further antagonized the West, and they isolated Mao from the USSR, which chose to withhold nuclear and missile technology from China. By the 1970s,

China had become alienated from both east and west, and was exhausting itself with domestic strife on a near-suicidal scale.

After the Cultural Revolution, an ailing and elderly Mao took steps to remedy China's isolation by approving limited diplomatic overtures to the United States. In 1972, Mao and longtime "red-baiter" President Richard Nixon (1913–1994) met to work out the possibility of normalized relations between the PRC and the US. The Shanghai Communiqué marked China's reentry to the world and allowed the moderates of the late 1950s to reassert themselves. After Mao's death in 1976, Deng maneuvered his way into leadership of the PRC and implemented his vision of a new, even quasi-capitalist China, based on "Four Modernizations," i.e., the modernization of military forces, education, industry, and agriculture. Throughout the 1980s, Deng's China was an energetic, resurgent power, although certainly not in the modern Western sense. The brutal 1989 crackdown on students in Tiananmen Square was evidence that democracy would not become China's "fifth" modernization.

As formerly Marxist regimes in Europe succumbed to the tide of popular sovereignty and human rights, China re-invented itself as a kind of post-modern commercial and industrial power with a vibrant private sector, a renewed international assertiveness, and an expanding military. The Chinese government, however, is still authoritarian, and eschews civil rights and popular freedoms that have increasingly become part of the political fabric of many Western states since the Enlightenment, as well as in significant parts of Asia since World War II.

CONCLUSION

As suggested before, the recent history of Northeast Asia provides ways to consider the long-term historical significance of the Cold War as a transitional stage between the New Imperialism of the nineteenth century and the global capitalism of the twenty-first. So rapid and transformational were the events of 1945 to 1950 that it was hard to see that the "familiar" imperialism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had given way to a new mode of geopolitical power. Yet the Cold War, which dominated the consciousness of the postwar era, also disappeared with astonishing speed. This suggests that the flourishing of communism or democracy as colonial ideologies was never really at stake. What matters most about the Cold War, perhaps, is that for fifty years of apparent bipolar deadlock, the non-superpowers of the world were inadvertently creating the conditions of a new multi-polar global society. Anti-imperialism, nationalism, and the desires of Asian leaders and their constituents to build economically and militarily strong states were the major forces that shaped events. The end of the Cold War did not re-define the world; it merely showed the degree to which the redefinition was already in progress. The nations of Northeast Asia in particular emerged from the Cold War as mature, autonomous states, self-confident in a world whose ideological assumptions and operational modes were no longer under the control of any dominant empire. While the future is unknowable, it seems a safe bet that the ancient vitality of these great societies will find rejuvenation in new forms of political, economic, and social expression throughout the twenty-first century. ■

NOTES

1. Richard Bulliet et al., *The Earth and Its Peoples: A Global History*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 726–727. According to Bulliet's characterization, "New Imperialism" is that period between 1869 and 1914 that witnessed "an explosion of territorial conquests" by Europeans, Americans, and Japanese in various regions of the world. In terms of its operations, the imperial powers of the era "used economic and

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President Nixon meets with Mao in Shanghai on February 28, 1972.

Image source: http://www.china-profile.com/history/indepth/id_64.htm.

technological means to reorganize dependent regions and bring them into the world economy as suppliers of foodstuffs and raw materials and consumers of industrial products" (727). New Imperialism as a category is distinct from other historical modes of imperial expansion; within the specific context of the modern world, it constitutes a third "wave" of Western imperialism. The first wave can be identified as the sixteenth century Age of Exploration that led to the conquest of South America, the Caribbean, and Mexico, and brought Portuguese and Spanish traders to the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The second wave can be identified as the establishment of colonies by North Atlantic mercantile powers such as the Netherlands, England, and France. As this essay seeks to demonstrate, the history of global power is by no means over, but it is also by no means uniform.

2. The exact number of Chinese volunteer troops deployed is unclear. Historian Jonathan Spence claims that there were between 700,000 and 900,000 casualties (dead and wounded), which would imply dramatically high numbers in the total force. See Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), 505.
3. See Chalmers Johnson, *Japan: Who Governs? The Rise of the Developmental State* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995). According to Johnson the Capitalist Developmental State (CDS) is a neo-mercantilist state in which political authorities influence or even direct economic operations in order to optimize balances of trade and the acquisition of international markets. The CDS model emphasizes a high level of exports, high savings rates, low wages, protectionism, and close cooperation between industry, labor, and government.
4. The death toll for the Cultural Revolution is also unclear and much debated. Reasonable estimates place the number at about 400,000, although some estimates place the number between one and three million. See Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 371–373.

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