

Where the Cold War Lives

THE Korean War was halted by a 1953 armistice. Sixty years later, some 28,000 US troops—8,000 of them airmen—are still stationed in South Korea. They are there to defend the democratic, free-market, and allied South from its neighbor to the North. Recent events show why this is both good and necessary.

The Korean Peninsula is famously split along the 38th Parallel between South Korea (the ROK) and North Korea (the DPRK), a belligerent and confrontational dynastic communist state.

DPRK has a failed economy and can barely feed its people. It maintains a million men under arms, however, and exploded nuclear devices in 2006 and 2009. The regime is predictably unpredictable—ratcheting up tensions when it seeks to extract concessions such as food aid from the international community, or to rally its people around its leadership.

Some of the crises it manufactures are deadly. Without provocation, DPRK sank a ROK Navy ship in 2010, killing 46 sailors. Later that year, it shelled a South Korean island, killing two troops and two civilians.

When Kim Jong Un took control of DPRK at the end of 2011, he put the North under its third generation of family leadership. There was initially hope the 30-year-old Kim would ease his father's repressive policies and accept international norms. These hopes have largely been dashed.

Threats and provocations are par for the course. DPRK exploits the international community for its own benefit, an extension of the way North Korea exploits its own people for its rulers' benefit. The DPRK has a stated goal of reunifying the peninsula, by force if necessary.

This past December, DPRK successfully tested a long-range rocket. This year, it successfully detonated a third nuclear device. In March, the North announced it "scrapped completely" the armistice.

DPRK is a brutal regime where dissent is not tolerated. No matter how bad you think life is in North Korea, the reality is worse. Citizens exist to support the elites and ruling family, making

the country a prison to its people. The citizens are systematically oppressed and lied to, to prop up the leadership.

South Korea stands in stark contrast to all of this. There is probably no place on earth where the failings of communism and the successes of freedom are in such clear contrast. The South has risen from Korean War destruction to become a valuable US ally with one of the world's most advanced and vibrant economies.

North Korea has dashed hopes that it might change.

The US has backstopped South Korea's defense from the beginning, and the North, almost without doubt, would again attempt to seize the South if not for the deterrent power of the US presence. The ROK military is highly capable, but the US (and the Air Force in particular) makes it vastly more credible. Keeping this combined deterrent sharp requires constant effort.

Airmen on the peninsula pride themselves on being ready to fight tonight—because there is no alternative. USAF's airmen and their A-10s, F-16s, U-2s, and other systems in the South, all supported by an air and space operations center, stay at a high state of readiness.

The vast majority of the US troops on the peninsula are on unaccompanied, one-year tours that allow them to focus single-mindedly on their mission. Staffing rates are high, and exercises are realistic and constant.

Military officers frequently mention the "tyranny of distance" in the Pacific, as the region encompasses roughly half the Earth's surface and great distances must be accounted for and overcome. In Korea, planners have to worry about the opposite problem: the tyranny of proximity. Downtown Seoul is less than an hour's drive from the demilitarized zone that separates it from the North. Greater Seoul is the world's second largest urban area. It is also within DPRK artillery range.

Major war would create military and humanitarian chaos, as millions of civilians would try to escape the fighting by moving through a shifting battlefield that included Seoul's urban area.

The Air Force prepares for war by studying the enemy and its likely invasion routes, working closely with ground forces and air controllers to master the scenarios.

In the event of a North Korean invasion, US aircraft out of Japan, Guam, Alaska, and elsewhere would quickly augment the American forces. The ROKAF has hundreds of advanced fighters of its own. This combined air force would devastate advancing DPRK troops and would immediately take the fight north. From Osan Air Base, south of Seoul, it is just a 15-minute flight to Pyongyang, North Korea.

If the North chose to invade, it would lose the war. The DPRK has numerical advantages, but its conventional capabilities are slowly fading while ROK and US capabilities grow ever greater. And while the North Koreans can study US tactics, "they don't understand how flexible we can be," said USAF Maj. Gen. Brian T. Bishop, deputy chief of staff for US Forces Korea.

Public exercises show strength and resolve. Annual events such as Key Resolve and Ulchi Freedom Guardian keep the US and ROK ready and send a clear message: If necessary, the defenders will defeat the North. A DPRK invasion would end North Korea's Kim dynasty—and for all of its bluster and skirmishing, survival is what matters most to the regime.

Between 1950 and 1953, some 1.8 million Americans served in the Korean War, and more than 33,000 of them were killed in action. They did not die in vain. The Korean armistice turns 60 this year, and in the years since, the US and South Korea won the war. The North is contained, the South is free and prosperous, and American airmen help keep this status quo through their readiness and vigilance.

The Kim regime is unlikely to embrace meaningful reforms, as that ultimately led to the downfall of many dictators. A revolution would be messy, violent, and create a massive humanitarian problem. A new war would create the worst situation of all.

It is hard to envision a "good" way for this standoff to end, but thanks to the deterrent power of airpower, the South can remain at peace. ■