

Hindsight

Case:

H28

Logline:

Geographical Interest:

East Asia

Topic:

North Korea

Tagline:

Title: Why North Korea is Untouchable (not Nukes!)

1. Hook

It is 1968.

The United States sent a spy ship to the Sea of Japan. Under the guise of conducting environmental research, they were aiming to intercept communications from North Korea.

But at some point, a North Korean vessel appeared.

They demanded that the Americans identified themselves. They followed protocol. They raised the American flag, and two civilian oceanographers explained they were conducting research.

But the North Koreans didn't buy it, and they demanded to come aboard.

With the entire lower deck filled with surveillance equipment, they knew this wasn't an option, and they fled.

This started a 2-hour chase. The North Koreans were quickly joined by 2 smaller boats, and they fired with live ammunition at the Americans.

As hard as the Americans tried, they were eventually forced to surrender. [0]

"The North Koreans have seized the US Navy Ship with 82 men aboard and have taken it into a North Korean Port." [0]

The Americans were imprisoned. Behind the façade of an international media frenzy, the U.S. intelligence agencies were working around the clock.

Lyndon B. Johnson was the President of the United States. He was briefed on what would be called the **Pueblo Incident**.

In this first memo, it says that the ship's **"closest point of approach to North Korean territory was 13 NM"**, which contradicts North Korea's claim that it entered its territorial water. [0]

The CIA believed that **"North Korea captured the Pueblo (*for propaganda*) both at home and abroad."** [0]

The President's first order was to not create **obstacles to a diplomatic solution by facing the North Koreans and the Soviets with an ultimatum or with military actions.**" But that sentiment quickly changed.

Their **"index of possible actions"** included **"reconnaissance"** missions, **"electronic jamming operations"**, a **"show of force"**, **"air strikes"**, a **"raid across DMZ"**, and so forth. [0]

Those plans were quickly extended to **a nuclear contingency plan**, with the goal to neutralize the North Korean Airforce (**"neutralization of the North Korean AOB"**). And these plans enjoyed (**"complete revision"**) and were **approved** at the highest level of government. [0]

The situation remained tense for months, until almost a year later, the Americans were released.

During this year, 1968, some feared another Korean War, but it didn't happen. Then again in the 1990s, the two countries almost went to war, but they didn't. Then again in the early 2000s.

You might think that the reason is that North Korea has nukes – the ultimate deterrent. But let me remind you that they conducted their first nuclear test in 2006. So something else must be going on.

Let me break it down for you... with Hindsight.

2. Bumper

3. Body

When the Korean peninsula was engulfed in the Korean war, the United States was far ahead with its nuclear technology. We now know exactly how close they actually came to using the bomb. [0]

The Korean Peninsula was divided after World War II. The North was communist, and the South capitalist. Both wanted reunification on their own terms, but the negotiation was going nowhere. In June 1950, North Korea decided to leverage its military advantage.

They crossed the border into South Korea, starting the Korean War. They were incredibly successful and rapidly gained terrain. I'll pause the timeline here, two months into the operation, and South Korea was on the brink of defeat.

At this moment, the United Nations contributed an army to help South Korea. This was for 90% made up of American Soldiers. They launched an amphibious attack near Seoul, and simultaneously attacked from the South. In just a matter of weeks, they reached the border with China.

I'll pause it again. Because at this moment the Chinese decided to join North Korea in combat. They were preparing an army of 200,000 soldiers, which made the United States reasonably anxious.

Harry S. Truman, at that time President of the United States, was the only President who had ever authorized the use of nuclear bombs. Five years earlier on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Those were delivered with the B-29 Superfortress, which were the only planes at that time that could deliver the enormous plutonium bombs. But after Japan they were retired. The planes were underpowered, had frequent engine fires, and used outdated propeller engines. [0]

But Truman was deeply concerned with the expected involvement of the Chinese in the Korean War.

The American people overwhelmingly supported U.S. intervention in Korea at the start of the war, with 78% being in favor. But only 6 months later, that number dropped to 38%.

Truman needed a quick way out, especially now they were on the winning hand.

So he ordered 10 retired B-29 aircrafts to be flown into the military base in Guam. Each airplane was carrying an atomic bomb that was similar in size as the one dropped in Nagasaki. This was the first time since 1945, that atomic weapons were transferred to military custody. [0]

In a press conference, President Truman said "We will take whatever steps are necessary to meet the military situation", to which a reporter asked: "will that include the atomic bomb?", he responded: "that includes every weapon we have."

His active consideration of the atomic bomb was confirmed several more times.

The Chinese had of course heard these warnings, and they had noticed the nuclear buildup in Guam, but it wasn't enough. With around 200,000 soldiers they entered the war on North Korea's side. This gave the North Koreans a huge edge, and the frontline shifted towards the border of North and South Korea at the start of the war. (April 1951).

Truman ordered the B-29s to be deployed in Okinawa, and he ordered the bombs to be ready for use, meaning that the nuclear cores would be installed.

The U.S. Air Force then conducted several runs using dummy nuclear weapons, to train for an actual nuclear attack on North Korea (Operation Hudson Harbor). [0]

But as the war was reaching a stalemate, the Americans never followed through on these plans.

Historians theorize that Truman chose not to use the weapons out of fear of escalation to a third World War, because their allies opposed its use, and for a lack of urban centers to target. [0]

In 1953, they signed an armistice agreement, which led to the creation of the border as we know it today.

Truman left office and Eisenhower became President. Declassified memos show that the planning for a nuclear engagement continued, and that the United States actively lobbied with its allies for placing nuclear weapons East Asia. [0]

The Koreans, in the first decades after the war, were reinventing themselves. North Korea inherited much of the country's infrastructure, heavy industry, and fertile farmlands. In the first decades, it seemed more likely that they would develop into a prosperous, industrial state.

South Korea's economy was for 80% made up of American aid. The United States paid for their military and for rebuilding their basic infrastructure after the war. But despite this massive investment, the country was deeply corrupt, and for the first two decades after the war they showed little sustained economic growth.

North and South Korea were going head-to-head, with the North Korean economy growing slightly faster. But they were praised for free housing and free healthcare programs. Their life expectancy, at that time, was comparable to some of the most advanced nations in the world. [0]

While the market-oriented democracy that the United States was hoping to build was on a trajectory to becoming a failed, autocratic state. [0]

In the North, Kim Il-sung was selected by the Soviet Union to become the absolute leader. He initially had strong ties with China and the Soviet Union, but in the aftermath of the Korean War, the *juche* philosophy came to dominate his politics. This translates to "self-reliance", and the concept emphasizes independence and sovereignty as principles to guide the nation's politics, economy, and defense. [0]

In the mid 1970s, something changed. North Korea's economy stagnated, while South Korea's rate of economic growth was increasing.

North Korea aligned itself more with China, upon which the Soviet Union decided to reduce its support. Meanwhile, the United States was putting more military pressure on the region, which forced North Korea to spend more on its defense. [0]

At the same time, South Korea made a series of good decisions. They used foreign aid to support heavy industry, electronics, and steel industries. They provided support to domestic industries, which fostered the growth of companies such as Samsung and Hyundai. The export took off, consumer confidence grew, and the economy developed at record speeds. [0]

The region enjoyed relative peace, but the unequal pace of development made reunification an even less likely prospect.

South Korea now had one of the biggest economies in the world. But they had systematic problems with corruption, and the country was led by increasingly authoritarian leaders. This led to massive protests to break out in 1987, after which the country underwent reforms, and enjoyed even more economic growth. [0][0]

While North Korea's economy collapsed.

This unbalance on the peninsula was perceived by the United States as a threat.

On December 24, 1991, Kim Jong-il was named commander-in-chief, after his father fell ill.

The very next day, the Soviet Union dissolved. This meant that the aid to North Korea had now virtually dried up.

Kim Jong-il replaced the leading political philosophy to a concept called "songun", or: military first. This effectively meant that the military was more important than any other element in society. [0]

These events were closely followed by the CIA.

Kim Jong-il had taken over many duties from his father, but Kim Il-Sung was still North Korea's supreme leader. He had always wanted to possess nuclear weapons. In 1984, he had begun testing rockets that could potentially carry these warheads.

These were still short-range missiles. But tests were later conducted more frequently, and with missiles capable of reaching targets at longer ranges.

George H.W. Bush was president, and he was tasked with containing the threat. In talks with South Korea, they "agreed that the development by North Korea of Nuclear Weapons (...) posed a gravely serious threat." [0], and that "nuclear weapons in North Korean hands are intolerable." [0]

Bush had set out to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, but with these developments in the North, he decided to stall this for now. [0]

When Clinton came to office in 1993, it truly escalated.

That year, North Korea renounced the nuclear arms treaty. [0] One of the main disagreements was the North Korean's refusal to open nuclear sites for inspectors. [0]

The world collectively disapproved and punished North Korea with sanctions.

After which they announced that they won't pull out of arms pacts now. That inspections could continue, but that sites linked to production of nuclear weapons would likely stay off limits. [0]

In the following weeks, North Korea allowed for some inspections, but not of all facilities. The United States responded by sending massive military reinforcement to South Korea, while simultaneously, in secret, planning to invade North Korea from the South.

The Pentagon made plans to strike a small nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. This would prevent North Korea from recovering the raw material that was necessary to make a nuclear bomb.

President Clinton said in his memoirs, that he was determined to prevent North Korea from developing a nuclear arsenal, even at the risk of war. He felt that it was the last opportunity for the world to prevent North Korea from becoming a nuclear power.

Such a strike on North Korea would almost certainly have resulted in war. This wasn't in the interest of South Korea, neither in that of China.

China has maintained a policy of "three nos": no war, no instability, no nukes. But their priority is a stable and peaceful Korea. They fear that a conflict would result in a massive flow of refugees into China, and that the contamination from biological or nuclear warfare would spread to Chinese cities. [0]

Before the plan of attacking the North Korean nuclear sites could be carried out, ex-President Jimmy Carter made a phone call. He spoke with Kim Il-Sung, after which he agreed to freeze their nuclear program in return for U.S. aid to meet North Korea's demand for energy. [0]

This was the closest that the two nations had come to war since 1953.

A few months later, Kim Il Sung died, and Kim Jong-Il formally became North Korea's supreme leader.

His leadership was characterized by severe economic mismanagement. Their foreign aid had mostly dried up, and strict international sanctions made importing goods extremely challenging.

Then a period of extreme rainfall, coupled with decades of poor land management, caused severe floods. This resulted in harvests to fail nationwide, and hundreds of thousands of North Koreans starved to death. [0]

The nuclear crisis was over, but the Clinton administration continued to consider military intervention.

“in the time of the nuclear crisis in North Korea”, Clinton’s defense minister said, “we planned for war (...) with the combined forces of the ROK and U.S., we can undoubtedly win [the war]. But war involves many casualties. (...) I will do my best to avoid war.” [0]

South Korea foresaw “enormous damage on Seoul”, and its president (“Kim Dae-jung”) “had no desire to undermine or “absorb” the North.” But the United States saw “the risk that a starving North Korea might become unstable and create a dangerously chaotic situation.” [0]

If the U.S. were to strike, this was the moment. But in moments of crisis, North Korea goes on the charm offensive.

Kim Jong Il’s reputation in South Korea began to improve. During visits to China, he moved with confidence and ease. The perception of him being a unpredictable mad man was being challenged, and this created a mood of optimism in the South that a genuine negotiation and potential breakthrough was possible. [0]

Clinton held hope for a diplomatic solution, but when President Bush came into office, he terminated all talks with the North.

In his 2002 State of the Union address, he made his stance very clear.

[axis of power speech]

Out of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, North Korea was by far the biggest threat to the United States. Their army was more than twice as big as that of Iraq. It was better equipped, had an impressive naval and air force, and their nuclear program was far more advanced.

[Bush announces start of Iraq War]

Yet, he chose to invade Iraq and negotiate with North Korea. [0]

And this decision to seek a diplomatic solution with North Korea was broadly supported by the American people.

Around the same time, Kim Jong-Il began testing missiles with longer ranges. In 2006, they conducted their first test with a nuclear warhead. This was repeated in 2009, and then under Kim Jong-un, the testing intensified.

The nuclear arsenal of North Korea is believed to now range between 35 and 65 warheads, which is today's ultimate deterrent.

The complicated geography, fear of escalation, lack of international consensus, domestic opposition, and a potential humanitarian crisis have influenced the United States decision to take a diplomatic route.

This is leveraged by North Korea's leaders.

In one memo, their method is described as "being obstreperous, applying pressure, and then relenting in the end." [0]

This is still common in North Korean politics. First, they raise tensions and come off as unpredictable and dangerous, then they get aid and go on a charm offensive to cool things down.

4. CTA

Check out one of these two videos next.

MAIN SOURCES:

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Nine charts which tell you all you need to know about North Korea (BBC):

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41228181>