

How Korea Became a Forgotten War

AN INTERVIEW WITH

OWEN MILLER

During the Korean War, the United States inflicted unimaginable horrors on the Korean people. Yet today Americans know almost nothing about their government's role in war crimes and atrocities.

INTERVIEW BY

DANIEL FINN

The conflict in Korea was the first “hot war” of the superpower confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. It was the first time — and, to date, the last time — that armies from the United States and the People’s Republic of China confronted each other directly on the battlefield. It left the two Korean states devastated, with millions of casualties and tremendous material destruction. The scars of the conflict are still very much in evidence today.

However, despite having played such a massive role in the Korean war, the United States has largely forgotten about it seventy years later. Korea has never occupied the same place in US public history or popular culture as Vietnam or, more recently, Iraq. Jacobin’s Daniel Finn spoke with historian Owen Miller about the legacy of the Korean war and the reasons for this amnesia.

This is a transcript from an episode of Jacobin’s *Long Reads* podcast. You can listen to the episode [here](#).

DANIEL FINN To begin with, can I ask you to give people a sense of the material and human cost of the Korean war? And can you address the question of how that war has come to be forgotten in the United States and elsewhere, certainly when compared to later conflicts like Vietnam?

OWEN MILLER To deal with the first question, about the human cost of the war: it was really huge, when you consider that this was a relatively small country — geographically or in terms of population — and yet it cost a huge number of lives. At least as many noncombatants died as soldiers — possibly around 2 million, although there has been no definitive accounting of the numbers of civilian casualties. People often talk about the casualties as being in the millions, which doesn't really tell us everything that we would like to know. When you compare it to today, where we get daily updates on the toll of the coronavirus, it's a huge contrast.

In many ways, there were three phases of the war, which were particularly brutal in different ways for the civilian population of the Korean peninsula. The first of those was before the start of the war proper. We're talking about the years 1948–49 in South Korea, where there was an emerging guerrilla war — a civil war against, first of all, the US military occupation government, and then against its successor, which was the South Korean government, the Republic of Korea government under Syngman Rhee.

That was a very brutal civil war, particularly on the island of Jeju, where it is still vividly remembered today, and where perhaps thirty thousand people were killed in that small-scale civil war. It continued into what has been described by some recent scholars as a kind of politicidal or genocidal war against Korean civilians and anyone who was deemed to be associated with communism or with communist guerrillas. That claimed the lives of thousands — perhaps hundreds of thousands — more before the start of the war proper, and also immediately after the war began in the summer of 1950, when many political prisoners and suspected communist sympathizers were killed by the Syngman Rhee regime.

That's the first phase: the lead-up to the war, which was also extremely brutal. Then the opening phase of the war itself, between June 1950 and February or March 1951, was a very mobile war with moving front lines. North Korean forces swept down the peninsula to begin with. You had the UN forces under US command sweeping back up the peninsula, then the Chinese and the North Korean sweeping down again, with the UN forces finally going back up once more.

You had four waves of the war, obviously each time driving refugees before them, causing dreadful human casualties but also destruction of roads, infrastructure, houses, and so on. That's the second phase, creating millions of refugees and displaced people, who ended up on the side of the border that they did not intend to be on or did not come from.

The final, third phase we can talk about is after the war had reached something of a stalemate in the spring of 1951. You have the beginnings of negotiations for an armistice, but the fighting continues at the front line, which is, by that time, rather ironically, quite close to the 38th parallel, where the peninsula had originally been divided.

At the same time, the US Air Force continues an extremely brutal and extensive aerial bombing campaign against North Korea, which lasts up until 1953 and causes huge devastation. Very few, if any, other countries in the twentieth century have been subjected to such an extensive bombing campaign that was so devastating to the entire country.

As for why it has been forgotten — there was a very good documentary made in the late 1980s by a British TV company, with Jon Halliday and Bruce Cumings, called *Korea: The Unknown War*, so yes, these ideas of an unknown or forgotten war are very much used in relation to Korea. One thing you could say is that Vietnam came along and, for various reasons, Vietnam eclipsed the Korean war in the consciousness of the United States and the world more generally. The Vietnam and Korean wars came from two different eras in terms of media, so I think that plays a role. Vietnam was often cited as the first big war of the TV news era.

There are many other reasons. In one sense, imperial powers don't like to remember the brutal wars they prosecute in various parts of the world. Britain doesn't like to remember its counterinsurgency campaigns and other wars that it carried out. It likes to remember its victorious war against fascism in the Second World War, but it doesn't remember other wars. I guess that's another reason — there's a deliberate amnesia around this.

It was not exactly a victorious war for the United States and the UN; it really ended in a stalemate, back at the situation that prevailed before the beginning of the war. It was not a victory for either side. Both sides found ways to claim victory, but neither really achieved exactly what it wanted to. In that sense, it's not a war to be remembered.

DANIEL FINN There was a controversy among historians for a long time about the origins of the war in the short term, rather than the long-term perspective. That was resolved, at least to some extent, by the opening of the Soviet archives in the early '90s, when we had proof that Stalin had indeed given his blessing to Kim Il Sung to launch an offensive against the South in 1950. But that still leaves open the question, doesn't it, of whether the war was a homegrown North Korean enterprise that Stalin endorsed, or if Stalin had his own reasons for wanting North Korea to go to war.

OWEN MILLER As far as I understand the historiography of the origins of the war, as it stands at the moment, it was very much a drive coming from Kim Il Sung and the leadership of North Korea to reunify the country by force. Kim Il Sung spent the best part of the year persuading Stalin and Mao to support him, or really to give him permission to go to war. It was something that came largely from the North Korean side.

Of course, there's a certain kind of logic going on here. It wasn't simply that the North Koreans wanted to invade South Korea. There was a kind of low-intensity conflict developing from 1948, and particularly in 1949, between North and South Korea, with incursions over the border from both sides, skirmishes and exchanges of fire.

I think, although aspects of what someone like Bruce Cumings argued about the origins of the Korean war have not stood up to the more recent historical scholarship, many of the things he said *do* stand up: for example, the fact that North and South Korea were already in a kind of conflictual state even before the war began. It was a question of which side would be able to go first, if you could put it that way.

When it comes to the question about Stalin or Mao, once they made the decision to support Kim Il Sung, they did have their own interests. I mean, you could never accuse Stalin of being completely altruistic! He had the strategic interests of the Soviet Union very much in mind. It did form part of the broader vying for power and influence in the world after the Second World War and at the beginning of the Cold War.

Stalin's decisions, first not to support Kim Il Sung in going to war, and then later to support him, both stemmed from his judgments about what was best in terms of extending and consolidating the Soviet Union's power, in Europe and in East Asia and in other places. Once the war was going, Stalin and Mao both wanted to prolong the war to some extent for their own ends, partly so that Stalin could distract the Americans from Europe.

DANIEL FINN That question about the origins of the war feeds into a wider issue. What was the character of the two Korean states that were established by the superpowers after 1945? And what was their relation to the long struggle against Japanese rule that had proceeded it?

OWEN MILLER This is a really huge question. I can't possibly do it justice, but I can hopefully cover it in outline. The two states were both, even before the war, ones that we would recognize as being authoritarian.

The northern state was very much modeled institutionally on the Soviet Union, with the security apparatus in some ways replicated in North Korea, alongside the government institutions — or what they would have called democratic institutions — based on the Soviet model. That, of course, did include the suppression of other political parties, political dissidents, and so on, from early on, even under the Soviet military occupation, before the North Korean government was established.

In the South, there was a similar picture. The US military government in South Korea began to suppress oppositional forces, particularly those associated with the communists or with trade unions, in 1946. Their suppression of those forces became stronger and stronger in 1947. In 1948, the Republic of Korea government is established under Syngman Rhee, who I think most people have recognized to be quite an authoritarian character. Very quickly in 1948 and 1949, they began to introduce powerful and sweeping legal powers to suppress opposition.

As I said in my previous answer, they actually began to physically suppress communists and fight a counterinsurgency battle in some parts of the country, and also to round up any suspected communists, along with many people who probably had nothing to do with South Korean communism. It was an authoritarian government, and not just against people who were communists — authoritarian methods were used against the noncommunist opposition to Syngman Rhee as well.

In terms of the relationship to Japanese rule, there are different ways of looking at this. Both of the governments in North and South Korea had people who were very important in the independence movement against Japanese rule. Syngman Rhee himself was a longtime exile and a prominent member of pro-independence organizations. In North Korea, Kim Il Sung had been a guerrilla fighter in the Chinese Communist Party, fighting with Koreans in Manchuria against Japanese colonial rule in the 1930s.

They both had some pedigree of being independence fighters, but the reality was very complicated. There were a lot of other figures who might have had just as much, if not more, of a claim to represent the Korean people after liberation in 1945. A number of those people were famously either imprisoned or killed in both North and South Korea.

For example, in South Korea, there were two key figures: Kim Gu, one of the early presidents of the Korean provisional government-in-exile, and another independence fighter, Yo Un-hyong, who had once met Lenin and Trotsky in Moscow. Both of them were assassinated in the late '40s, quite possibly on the orders of Syngman Rhee.

There's so much more that could be said about their relationship to Japanese rule and the independence movement. Both North and South Korea also inherited elements of Japanese bureaucratic government — South Korea much more so than North Korea, but we can find, even in North Korea, traces of elements that were inherited from the colonial governments.

In a way, it's almost impossible for that not to happen in a postcolonial state — it inherits some aspects of colonial rule, bureaucratic systems and so on — but it was much more marked in South Korea. There was a huge issue around the question of collaborators who had worked with the Japanese colonial regime, and which of them should be excluded from government and public roles. Should any of them have their property confiscated? It's still a live issue today, seventy-five years after liberation.

DANIEL FINN In view of their underlying political character and the divergence between them, do you think it was only a matter of time before there was a war — that is, if the North had not started the war, the South might very well have done the same?

OWEN MILLER I never like to say that things were inevitable in history, but I think it is pretty likely that there was going to be a war between North and South Korea. Even if Kim Il Sung had not gotten the permission of Stalin and Mao to start that war in the summer of 1950, it's something that may well have broken out anyway. It's certainly possible that it would have come from Syngman Rhee as the president of South Korea. He was someone who openly talked about marching north to reunify the country with military force.

Now, whether that was rhetorical or something that he could actually achieve is another matter. He didn't get the backing of the United States in the way that Kim Il Sung got the backing of the Soviet Union. He didn't get the tanks or the military training that North Korea got. North Korea was in a considerably better position militarily to carry out the attack on the South, despite the fact that South Korea was twice as large in terms of population as North Korea, and still is today.

DANIEL FINN Within a few months of the war's beginning, two major powers had become involved: the United States on the side of the South, and China on the side of the North. Could you talk a little about their respective motivations for getting directly involved in the conflict, and what impact it had on the character of the war?

OWEN MILLER This is an interesting one. Sometimes it seems, when we look at the Korean War, as though several different people in different states made miscalculations in this war. First of all, the North Koreans, and to some extent the Chinese and the Soviets, made a miscalculation that the Americans would not intervene, or at least would not intervene in such force. Then the Americans decided in September–October 1950 to go over the 38th parallel into North Korea, and they directly

threatened China. They made a miscalculation that China would not intervene in force as well. You have this escalating set of miscalculations.



Korean War refugees in Haengju, Korea, on June 9, 1951. (National Archives and Records Administration)

I'm not an expert on what was driving US politics at the time in the summer of 1950, but clearly, at that point, the US leadership decided that it was time to draw a line and defend one of their satellite states, to prevent the "domino effect" — something that came to be a very key phrase in the Cold War. They obviously used the UN as a way of bringing together an alliance — essentially under US command but under the UN banner — to, as they would have put it, defend the Free World against aggression.

For the Chinese, on the one hand, part of the deal that was struck between Kim, Stalin, and Mao was that if things went badly for the North Koreans, the Chinese would intervene to defend them. That was one of Stalin's conditions for supporting the war in the first place. Stalin did not want the Soviet army to be directly involved.

Mao had to follow through on that when it became clear that the North Koreans were close to defeat, but China itself was also feeling threatened. That wasn't a fantasy of theirs: by October or early November 1950, the US-UN forces were right up at the border between North Korea and China, at the Yalu River, so they were threatening China directly.

You also have to remember that the Chinese civil war itself had only concluded about a year before this, so there was still the possibility that the fledgling People's Republic of China could be overturned and replaced by a Nationalist government. That's certainly what Chiang Kai-shek wanted in Taiwan. There was a real sense of threat.

You have Douglas MacArthur in charge, who was very gung ho at this point, and you have Curtis LeMay in charge of the US bomber command. These are people openly talking about using nuclear weapons against China as well, so it's understandable, in many ways, from the Chinese side, that they would decide to save the DPRK. It was self-interest added on top of Mao's obligation to Stalin.

DANIEL FINN Once you had that full-scale, Chinese intervention to counterbalance the full-scale American and British intervention on the side of the South, it did lead to an effective stalemate after a period of time. Yet the war itself dragged on for another two years after that. Why did it take so long to conclude an armistice?

OWEN MILLER This really is one of the many tragedies of the war, that, in a way, it should have ended a year after it began, back really where it had started. They should have agreed that they had reached a stalemate and could now have an armistice, but there were a number of factors that prolonged the war. There has been recent research looking at the reasons why Stalin and Mao, for their own strategic reasons, wanted to prolong the war. That helped to draw out the negotiations on the armistice.

There were other, perhaps more minor, factors. The key question within the armistice negotiations became the POW question. The POWs became a kind of new front line in the Cold War at this point. This has been detailed very well in a recent book by Monica Kim.

She outlines how there was a battle for the soul of the POWs, because the two sides argued different things. The Chinese and North Korean side argued that the POWs should, according to the Geneva Convention, be returned to the nation from which they had come. The US-UN side, on the other hand, argued that the POWs should be given freedom of choice about where they would go.

Of course, when you think about the Korean situation, where you have one people but fighting on two different sides; often people had to change sides, or were forcibly conscripted to the Southern side when they were actually supporting the North, and vice versa. That meant there was some sense to what the Americans were arguing, in the sense that it was not a clear question where people came from. The same problem applied to the Chinese soldiers, many of whom were

originally Nationalist soldiers who had then been conscripted into the Chinese volunteer army fighting in Korea.

Neither side could agree on how to deal with this question of the POWs, because both sides wanted to use it as propaganda, with people converting or defecting from one side to the other. In the end, they did come to a compromise of sorts, in which people could also choose a third option of not returning to either North or South Korea. It's a very interesting, complicated story, but that was one of the key problems that drew out the negotiation for months.

There was also jostling for advantage at the front line as well. Both sides thought they might be able to have a last push to gain more territory and get something more out of the war and not end up with a postwar armistice line that was essentially around about where the 38th parallel had been.

In South Korea, the end of the war became a controversial issue, with Syngman Rhee himself not wanting to end the war and fighting with the Americans. Obviously, he didn't have the ultimate say at all, but he was actually arguing with the Americans that the war should continue to the bitter end and trying to sabotage, at certain points, the American negotiation efforts. There was a number of different factors, but it is ultimately one of the great tragedies of the war that the fighting, death, and bombing carried on for two more years.

DANIEL FINN During this period of de facto stalemate, it didn't mean that the bombers were silent. In many ways, the most intense phase of the US bombing campaign took place during that part of the war. Do you think that there was any kind of coherent political or military rationale behind that bombing campaign, or was it an early example of that phenomenon of "if you have a weapon, you have to use it"?

OWEN MILLER I think it was probably a bit of both. It seems fairly clear that the US Air Force wanted to try out new weapons like napalm. For all sides in this war, tragically, it became a great arena in which to practice their military techniques and use their new technologies for the destruction of human beings. There was some strategic use to it for the Americans, but it seems to have become something of an end in itself.

They kept bombing, even though they'd run out of actual targets that would be any of any strategic value to them. They were bombing rural villages. On top of that, I guess it also had a function for the Americans of just putting pressure on the Chinese to conclude the negotiations. You have this game going on between the Chinese and the Americans — who will blink first — with the Americans using more and more bombing as pressure. But, of course, it was not actually the Chinese who were

being bombed. It was the Koreans, and by that time, the North Korean leadership really wanted the war to end. They were at odds with the Chinese on that.

DANIEL FINN You spoke a little earlier about the differences between Korea and Vietnam in terms of popular memory and public history and so on. But there was also a clear divergence between them at the time when the wars were taking place. There was a very powerful, very high-profile antiwar movement in the United States, but also in European countries and in Australia and Canada. Korea really didn't have the same impact. I know this is, to a large extent, a question about American and European politics, rather than one about Korean politics, but why do you think there was that divergence?

OWEN MILLER I think I can identify three key factors. I'm not saying these were at all exhaustive — people may come up with a number of others. One of them I mentioned earlier, the TV effect — the fact that people for the first time had this very direct, immediate view of a war on the ground, in a way that they hadn't before. It had been more mediated through newspapers, through newsreels, which are highly selective and edited and so on.

There were also other kinds of new reporting, with investigative reporting and reporting of atrocities and photographs, including some famous and iconic photographs that we've probably all seen multiple times. Although there were journalists who tried to expose some of the atrocities that happened during the Korean war, they didn't by any means get the kind of mainstream exposure that those journalists who exposed similar things in the Vietnam war did.

Second, I think generational differences are quite important here. The people who were going to fight in the Korean war had themselves just experienced World War II. Their families had just experienced it. They were used to living in an environment of war. Many of them, particularly in Europe, had experienced bombing campaigns themselves. This is not a very strange and exotic thing.

I think the generation who were fighting in the Vietnam war and who protested against it in the next era were their children. I guess we would say they were the boomer generation. They had had a very different experience. They had not just experienced another great world war. They were very focused on the Vietnam war as an expression of many of the things that were wrong in the world, and the way in which the United States was exerting its imperial power around the world and so on.

The third thing I would touch on would be that the whole political environment in the United States and in Europe was very different. The Korean war happens at the birth of the Cold War — when the

Cold War ideological framework is being born. You have the beginning of McCarthyism; you have all the discourse around the Free World. Perhaps it extends out of the discourse of fighting fascism in the Second World War as well. You can see, perhaps, how the wider public goes along with the idea of fighting to defend freedom in Korea.

By the time of the Vietnam war, I think the Cold War ideological framework is pretty worn out. People are questioning the idea of the US-led Free World much more. It also comes in the context of the civil rights movement in the United States and the rise of a New Left in Europe, people who would then give birth to the great revolutionary year of 1968. That New Left surge played a role in creating the Vietnam protests as well.

DANIEL FINN In relation to that question, but a little more specific, perhaps: what was the position, or the attitude, taken by the international left at the time in all its different components — social democrats, communists, and other minority currents on the Left as well?

OWEN MILLER Obviously, official communist parties around the world were in support of North Korea, and in support of the Chinese intervention. That goes without saying, really. I have not heard of any kind of dissident views coming from people in communist parties.

With the social-democratic parties, it's a much more mixed picture. I think, in general, they will probably have been supportive of the UN action. You have to look at the UK, where it was a Labour government that sent troops to join the UN force in 1950. I think there will also have been many individual members and even politicians within social-democratic parties who did not support the war or were actively opposed to the war, but I don't think the organizations themselves were oppositional.

When it comes to Trotskyist attitudes to the war, this is interesting, because it opens up some of the big issues for Trotskyists in the postwar period about how they relate to the Soviet Union and the new Soviet satellite states that had been formed since 1945, including North Korea. This was a really big, live issue. The Korean war opened up the issue even more.

Putting it simply, the sort of mainstream or orthodox Trotskyists supported North Korea and the Chinese, and then there were dissident or heterodox Trotskyists in various parts of the world who opposed the war. This really came down to a couple of questions: Do you see the satellite states as being workers' states in some strange, deformed way, in the same way that Trotsky saw the Soviet Union as being a degenerated workers' state? If they are workers' states — if North Korea was a

workers' state, in some sense — then of course you would have to support it against the United States.



US fighter planes during the Korean War in 1951–52.
(US Navy / Wikimedia)

Another dimension of the question would be: Is this a colonial war, a national revolutionary war against colonialism? Is it a war to liquidate the remnants of Japanese colonialism, and also to throw off the neocolonialism of the United States in South Korea? Perhaps you could argue, even if you're a Trotskyist and you oppose the Soviet Union, that it's right to support North Korea, because they are prosecuting a nationalist revolution against colonial rule.

But many Trotskyists didn't agree with that — people like C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya in the United States, people like Tony Cliff in the UK, and there were also other figures like [Cornelius] Castoriadis in France who didn't take that line. They took more of a "third camp" position, saying that both sides were effectively acting as imperialists and this was a case of the first war between US imperialism and Soviet imperialism.

DANIEL FINN Almost seventy years on from the armistice, the partition of Korea is still frozen in the place where it was at the end of the war. What would you say have been the long-term

implications and consequences of the war for the political development of the two Korean states, and how have people in either of those states been able to face up to that historical memory?

OWEN MILLER Obviously, the war had a huge effect on the two Koreas. There's a famous quotation that wars make states. These were states that already existed before the war, but they were very much fledgling states, and the war certainly helped to consolidate two authoritarian states — perhaps you could call them garrison states — in which military service became a key part of the lives of all Korean men in both Koreas.

Today, South Korea still has one of the longest military service periods in the world. It is behind Israel, I think, and it is behind North Korea, because North Korea, I'm pretty sure, has the longest military service period in the world — something like ten years, depending on various factors.

The war created these garrison states built around an extreme form of developmentalism in both countries during the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. That forced-pace industrialization was also closely related to the militarism — the need to build up a strong army with strong military hardware to defend themselves against each other, or potentially to carry out reunification by force at some point. They created in a sense these two mirror-image, militarized states in both countries. Both North and South Korea in the 1950s and '60s and '70s developed a very extensive security apparatus for suppressing dissidents.

The big difference then comes in the 1980s, when there is a big democracy movement in South Korea, which is ultimately victorious in 1987–88, with the first democratic elections in 1988. That does not mean that South Korea was instantly able to begin coming to terms with the legacy of the war. The run-up to the war, which was such a brutal and almost genocidal time in Korea's history, is not something that it came to terms with straightaway. That has taken a number of decades.

It's really once you get into the early 2000s that there is enough impetus in South Korea to begin coming to terms with so many of the issues. You get a truth and reconciliation commission established in that time. Since then, gradually, more and more research has been done and more and more of this has come out into the open, but it's still a slow process, and it's very far from complete.

One of the places where it has gone the furthest would be in Jeju Island, off the south coast of South Korea, which was the place where there was a major uprising against the military government and then the Syngman Rhee government in 1948–49. You can go there and visit the peace park and the museum and see these incredible memorials to the people that died. I think that process has still got quite a long way to go in the rest of South Korea.

In terms of North Korea — both North and South Korea created their own self-serving narratives of the Korean war after it ended. Certainly, North Korea has done that very much. I've actually visited the war museum in Pyongyang. To give you a sense of the self-serving narrative that they have in North Korea, it's called the Museum of the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War. It is very much referred to with the prefix "victorious," and as a war to liberate the fatherland, and that narrative is very fixed. It continues to this day, and it also helps to serve the personality cult of the Kim family.

That museum apparently does have some fairly extensive exhibitions about the role of the Chinese forces, but those exhibitions are not very prominent, particularly to someone like me, coming from a European country. I was not shown those exhibitions; apparently, they're mainly shown to Chinese visitors to North Korea. The narrative really focuses on Kim Il Sung and on the victorious North Korean role in fighting off the American imperialists.

It's as yet very difficult to move beyond that kind of narrative in North Korea. Almost all narratives about Korean history in North Korea are really mandated by the state, and none more so than the recent history. I think when it comes to the Korean war, there is only really one way to interpret it. I don't know when such a reckoning with the legacy of the war will happen in North Korea.

Unfortunately, those people who directly participated in it will probably have died by the time such a reckoning can happen.

DANIEL FINN There's an interesting contrast, isn't there, between Korea and Vietnam, in terms of postwar development? Vietnam, both North and South, suffered the same kind of material devastation as North Korea did, with carpet-bombing by the United States, free-fire zones, the Phoenix Program, and so on — all the atrocities that are well known. And yes, even though it came out of the same ideological matrix of the Soviet-led communist movement, the political character of the postwar Vietnamese state is quite different from the character of the North Korean state. Of course, it's a one-party state, it's authoritarian, but it appears to be much more open to the outside world, and to practice a different kind of collective leadership. There's never been the same personality cult, even around a figure like Ho Chi Minh, let alone any of the postwar leaders. Do you think that's best explained by the fact that Vietnam won the war?

OWEN MILLER I think it absolutely is. It's something that's really fascinated me before, just looking at the difference between the outcomes in the two countries. One thing that always amazes me whenever I remind myself of this fact is that it's the Vietnamese who began to seek reconciliation with the Americans, to some extent, very, very early on, and to reestablish trade links and so on.

Then, of course, they moved on in the '80s very quickly to follow the Chinese example of reform and opening, and became, in capitalist terms, very successful at that particular pathway, which you certainly can't say about the North Korean economy. It's absolutely to do with the fact that the North Korean leaders didn't win, and they didn't reunify the country.

North and South Korea have been locked in this division system, as it's been called by some scholars, which both states are built around in a way — the South Korean state less so today, but still, to some extent, it is built around this division system. They are reliant on it, in a sense. Everything that North Korea does has to reflect the fact of division and the fact that it is locked in a deadly rivalry with the world's biggest superpower and with its southern neighbor. I think that's frozen much of North Korea's political development in place.

When people look at North Korea and see this very strange, abnormal place — this place that's out of time, stuck in the past — I think what they're seeing is the way in which the political system in North Korea, in order to preserve itself, has had to take on this rigid, fossilized character. I have to be careful in talking about this, because North Korea has changed massively in the last couple of decades, but its political system has become quite fossilized in place. It has not been able to contemplate the kind of reforms and opening that happened in China or Vietnam, because it fears that, with South Korea as its neighbor and the United States breathing down its neck, those reforms would spell the end, basically in the same way that perestroika did for the Soviet Union.

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