

Focus on volatile Korea

The two tragedies that have struck South Korea in a little over one month attest to the strategic importance and vulnerability of this hard, mountainous land.

Sir Harold MacKinder, the father of geopolitics, considered Korea as one of the world's five most strategic nations. Jutting out of the north Asian coast, the Korean peninsula dominates the land, sea and air routes between Japan, northern China and the Pacific provinces of the Soviet Union.

Korea's important geographical position has been clearly recognized by its powerful neighbors. China has many times invaded Korea; Japan colonized it from the early 20th century; and Russia has long coveted the peninsula and its warm-water ports.

In many ways, Korea resembles Germany. Its industrious, sober population has been caught between the expansionist designs of more powerful neighbors. At the end of World War II, Korea was partitioned into Russian and American spheres of influence. This division appears to satisfy the great powers and many Koreans. As in the case of Germany, few non-Koreans really want to see this nation, totalling 58 million, reunited.

If South Korea's 39 million inhabitants were joined to North Korea's 19 million, a new state of great economic, political and military power would emerge, threatening the present uneasy balance in north Asia. Today, the two Koreas field military forces amounting to almost 1.4 million: If they were unified, Korea would become, in terms of ground troops, the world's fourth military power.

The bomb that killed six key South Korean officials in Rangoon, Burma, on October 9, was likely planted by North Korea's efficient intelligence service. This bloody incident, aimed at eliminating South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan, was only the latest episode in the covert war that has been waged between the two Koreas since the end of the Korean conflict in 1953.

North Korea, with strong Russian backing, has conducted sabotage, assassination and infiltration operations designed to bring down the pro-Western regimes in Seoul. Unlike North Korea, the epitome of a ruthless totalitarian system, South Korea has been run by its army and leading industrialists for many years. While certainly no democracy, South Korea does permit a degree of personal freedom sufficient to allow for some opposition and anti-government plots.

The United States, South Korea's supporter, has pressured the Seoul government, over recent years, to democratize and allow more political dissent. This relaxation, coupled with intense North Korean destabilization efforts and the inherent political instability of South Korea, has resulted in the growing vulnerability of the south.

The clear intention of North Korea's leader, Kim Il Sung, is to provoke the collapse of the Seoul government and profit from the ensuing chaos to launch his well-equipped army of 700,000 on a lightning invasion of the south. Many military analysts believe that even the presence of 40,000 American

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troops in Korea might not deter a swift, surprise attack on Seoul, which lies only 25 miles south of the border with North Korea.

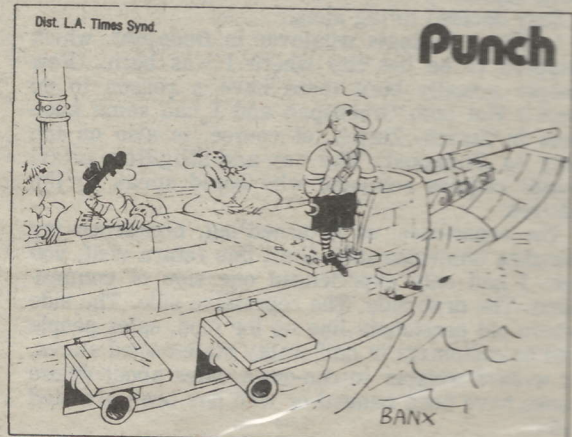
Kim Il Sung, who is, along with Albania's Enver Hoxha, one of the last World War II leaders still in power, has stated that he intends to "reunify" Korea by force before his death. He is also quoted as promising to pass onto his son — his designated heir apparent — a united communist Korea.

Sung's threats are not taken lightly. He is backed by the full economic and military power of Russia and, to a lesser degree, by China. During the military alert after the bombing in Rangoon, China threatened to send "volunteers" to aid North Korea in the event of a South Korean attack. This threat is particularly disturbing since one million Chinese "volunteers" entered the Korean War under just such a pretext.

The Koreans are another of those geopolitical fault zones where the great and regional powers meet and clash. The situation on the border between North and South Korea is so tense that limited or general fighting could erupt any day. The Koreans are a proud, warlike and emotional people: Their inherent volatility and internecine hatred makes the Korean peninsula one of the world's leading flashpoints.

The feud between the two Koreas, and their respective backers, may seem distant to us. But this peninsula is so vital to the strategic interests of both East and West that any outbreak of hostilities there could plunge the world into a major military confrontation.

(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)



"Now he wants to see a bloody social worker."

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