A Spark in North Korea: “This Tragic Loss of Life Was Unnecessary”
by Chalmers Johnson

An incident is some occurrence that may be trivial or serious but that has effects wildly out of proportion to the actual damage done. Thus we speak of a terrorist “incident” when a bombing or assassination sets in motion a train of events that would not normally be expected given the restricted nature of the actual assault. Incidents in international relations catalyze complex situations and make intrinsic configurations of power and influence extrinsic. The assassination of the Austrian crown prince in 1914 led to World War I; the refusal of the Cossacks to fire on the people of St. Petersburg in 1917 led to the Russian Revolution. The downing of a U.S. helicopter by North Korea may also be such an incident.

The concrete pattern of events in the Pacific since the end of the Cold War five years ago has been one of drift. Old Cold War alignments disguise the extent of the shift in the global balance of power to Asia. American military deployments add up to armed impotence under the new situations, and Americans are little prepared to cope with this development. Meanwhile, what passes for strategic thought is largely public relations posturing, bureaucratic in-fighting over turf, and the pretense of competence by political officials in the main Pacific powers. Other likely candidates for a catalytic incident include the imminent death of Deng Xiaoping in China and the reversion of Hong Kong to mainland Chinese rule in less than three years. But the Korean situation is, and long has been, a potential powderkeg.

The Americans became involved in Korea forty-five years ago not because of a Korean civil war but because of the influence of the former Soviet Union and China on the peninsula and our belief that communist aggression in Korea was part of a global advance of communism into any susceptible society. We fought on the side of the Republic of Korea against armies from the North because the backers of North Korea were Russia and China. However, since the Seoul Olympics of 1988 the ROK has had friendly relations with both Russia and China and now has formal diplomatic ties with both. Because of the
war of 1950-1953, we have ignored the North’s claims of legitimacy in the struggle against their former Japanese overlords and, as elsewhere in Asia, refused to see that Asian communism was largely a vehicle for anti-colonial nationalism. Our presence in Korea is still locked in a Cold War mold. We have some 37,000 front-line troops there, and the North has been trying to catch our attention by developing nuclear weapons.

Earlier this year, North Korea’s intransigence over nuclear weapons looked like it would be the incident that would finally begin to alter Cold War arrangements in East Asia. Through adroit diplomacy and by beating back Pentagon enthusiasts for “surgical strikes,” the U.S. seems to have defused a nuclear confrontation—even though we still do not know exactly what happened. All we know for certain is that Kim Il-sung saw Jimmy Carter and died. Whether that was a natural death we still wait to find out, and we must remain alert to the probable instabilities of a successor regime in Pyongyang headed by Kim Il-sung’s son.

But one thing is clear: The United States no longer has any reason to intervene in a Korean civil war. The Republic of Korea has two times the population and ten times the productive power of the North, from which come repeated reports of starvation among the population. Seoul should be fully capable of defending itself in any conflict not involving external powers or nuclear weapons.

I believe the United States should continue to guarantee the Republic of Korea’s security from nuclear attack but that American ground forces, based in the country for almost fifty years, should be withdrawn. Many American analysts agree but always add that the present time is not appropriate. They fail to note that there will never be a perfect time. But to leave them there makes them hostage to possible events over which they have no control. The unification of Korea is today a topic of Korean politics. We can help but we should not be caught in the middle.

This is the significance of the downing of a U.S. Army helicopter that had strayed into North Korea. The pilots probably did not know where they were; but they had no real business being in Korea at all, and were not ready for the kind of hair-trigger mentality that exists along the Korean demilitarized zone. They were there because of Pentagon inertia and the lack of any kind of American strategic vision for post-Cold War Asia. One pilot died. When President Clinton said, “This tragic loss of life was unnecessary,” he did not know how close to home the responsibility for his death actually lies. Unless the U.S. reconceives its military, political, and economic role in Asia, either this incident or some other one will prove to be the detonator for a larger, more serious explosion.

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The end of every calendar year, in both the U.S. and Japan, is the occasion for pundits, prognosticators, and fortune tellers to tell us what they see ahead in the year to come. 1995 is a particularly significant year for both countries in that it marks the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War. We know, even without the aid of a crystal ball, that next summer will bring an avalanche of movies, books, newspaper articles, wreath-layings, and other commemorative occasions on both sides of the ocean. Will it also bring a renewed round of angry name-calling about who started the war, how it ended, and who profited the most from the peace settlement?

Anniversaries—even of bitter events—can be a time of remembrance coupled with reconciliation. A sense of “look how far we have come since then” can prevail. And in the case of a war as complex and widespread as that in the Pacific, it is well to be respectful of other people’s grief and grievances: the Koreans, the Chinese, the Filipinos, the Indonesians, the Australians, the Singaporeans, the peoples of small islands in the Pacific whose names have entered history—Iwo Jima, Guadalcanal, and Saipan, to mention only a few—all have their own memories and stories to tell.

But the United States and Japan were the chief protagonists: the victor and the vanquished. Both suffered greatly, and thus it is natural that each should seek to emphasize those aspects of the war that reveal its own people as victims. Japan will emphasize Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The U.S. will recall Pearl Harbor, the battle of Okinawa, and the liberation of General Wainwright and the survivors of the Bataan Death March.

Both sides may also recall that once the war was over, there were numerous acts of kindness, good will, and reconciliation. It is remarkable how swiftly wartime stereotypes on both sides dissipated. In a recent book comparing postwar Germany and Japan, Ian Buruma argues that Germany has acknowledged and accepted its wartime guilt more fully than Japan. But there was nothing comparable to the Nazi ideology and destruction of the Jews in Japan or Japanese-occupied territories (with the exception of the so-called “rape of Nanking” and the pacification campaigns in North China, which the Japanese would do well to come to terms with if they ever hope to have decent relations with the Chinese). Nonetheless, the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War comes at an awkward time in the relationship between Japan and the U.S. A recent opinion poll revealed that 52% of the Americans interviewed now view Japan as a rival and only 19% call it a friend, and that 37% said their feelings about Japan had worsened in the past ten years. Meanwhile 56% of the Japanese polled said their feelings about the U.S. hadn’t changed in the past decade, but only 28% thought they would get better. Asked to explain their negative views of Japan, Americans most often cited Japan’s single-minded pursuit of economic gain and its reluctance to make international contributions. Japanese, on the other hand, said that friction with the U.S. was caused by the fact that the Japanese government doesn’t explain itself well and by America “forcing” its foreign policy on Japan. Both sides, in other words, blame the deteriorating relationship primarily on the behavior of the other.
It is likely that the anniversary of the end of the Pacific War will exacerbate these negative perceptions. The controversy over whether the U.S. should issue a postage stamp featuring an atomic cloud and the message: “Atomic bombs hasten war’s end, August 1945” may be only a harbinger of the year ahead.

On the surface of it, the U.S. Postal Service seems exceedingly stupid and insensitive to have insulted not only the Japanese but also many Americans who feel ambivalent about the U.S.’s development and use of nuclear weapons. But in context the decision looks rather different. For five years, starting in 1991, a series of ten stamps a year has been issued commemorating events that occurred during World War II fifty years prior to that particular year. In 1991, for example, the ten stamps included the Burma Road, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the Declaration of War by the U.S. against Japan. In 1992, the stamps featured the Doolittle raid on Tokyo, and the battles of the Coral Sea, Corregidor, and Guadalcanal. In 1993, the stamps dealt primarily with events in Europe--U-Boats, Sicily, the air-raids on Ploesti, and the Allied landing in Italy--but also included the battle of Tarawa.

The stamps issued in 1994, and still available at local post offices, feature the Normandy landings, Bastogne and the Battle of the Bulge, and the Allies’ liberation of Rome. But one commemorates the battles in New Guinea, and another the battle of Leyte Gulf. Two other stamps deal with the war in the Pacific. One shows soldiers with bayonets and flamethrowers and bears the legend: “U.S. troops clear Saipan bunkers.” The other depicts submarines at sea and is entitled: “Submarines shorten war in Pacific”.

It is not too surprising, therefore, that the series of ten stamps planned for 1995 should have included the liberation of the Holocaust survivors, the flag-raising on Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima, the battles for Manila and Okinawa, and--finally--a mushroom cloud together with a message similar to the one found on the submarine stamp. Perhaps the Postal Service was being obtuse not to foresee the outcry it would create in Japan, but they clearly thought it was just another stamp in the series, no different from any of the others.

The Clinton administration has now persuaded postal officials to withdraw the stamp in favor of one that shows President Truman announcing the end of the war. The controversy itself will be quickly forgotten by both sides, but it is emblematic of the present state of U.S.-Japan relations. I predict that the coming year will see more friction between the U.S. and Japan--perhaps some of it couched in terms of the war and other images from the past. But the real issues will be the contemporary ones of the trade imbalance and Japan’s future role in world affairs. And these, I’m afraid, will not be as easily resolved.

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