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Korean Ghosts

An old conflict comes back to haunt us...

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Justin is undergoing continuing treatment and hopes to return with a new column soon. Here is a very relevant column he wrote about Korea in 2003.

On June 13, 2002, Shin Hyo-soon and Shim Mi-sun, both 14 years old, walked along the side of a road [on their way to a birthday party](#), chattering and laughing, as children do. They never saw the mammoth U.S. military truck with two soldiers on board as it crushed them, grinding their bodies into the South Korean earth.

A "tragic accident" say U.S. diplomats and military officers; an example of the heedless arrogance of American troops who have long since worn out their welcome, say growing numbers of South Koreans. Under the terms of the agreement between South Korea and the U.S. – which mandates that American soldiers charged with crimes on Korean soil are subject to U.S. law – Sgt. Fernando Nino and Sgt. Mark Walker were tried in a military court and acquitted of negligent homicide charges. The process was widely resented, and the reaction of [virtually all political parties in South Korea](#) was to denounce the verdict as a sham.

Here in the Imperial metropolis, the incident attracted little notice: a flare-up on the far frontier of the Empire, easily relegated to the back pages. *Stars and Stripes* was the only major American periodical to [identify the girls by name](#) at the time.

Out on the Korean fringes of the American Empire, however, the [reaction](#) was swift and ominous. After the verdict was announced, tens of thousands turned out in "Yankee go home" demonstrations of typically Korean ferocity, in which dozens were injured. Korea's pro-American President, [Kim Dae-jung](#), said it was [time to renegotiate](#) the terms of the agreement.

The incident roiled the waters of the presidential election campaign: as even the generally pro-U.S. [Grand National Party](#) candidate – far ahead in the polls at that point – began to [distance](#) himself from the Americans. But the main beneficiary was [Roh Moo-hyun](#), of the pro-government Democratic Millennium Party, who has been more critical of the U.S. presence.

"I don't have any anti-American sentiment," declared Roh, "but I won't kowtow to the Americans, either." A willingness to continue the [sunshine policy](#) of his predecessor – and stand up to the Americans – propelled Roh to a narrow triumph. The margin of victory may well have been provided by neoconservative hardliner Richard Perle, affectionately known

around Washington as "the [Prince of Darkness](#)," [who declared](#), on the eve of the election, that war with Pyongyang might be necessary.

The fall of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe showed Pyongyang two possible roads to the future. The North has been desperately trying to break out of its economic and political isolation, seeking to emulate East Germany rather than, say, Romania, and emerge out of the post-communist wilderness.

But the North-South rapprochement, which for a while showed real promise of effecting détente (if not reunification of the peninsula), was stopped dead in its tracks by the ascension of the hardliners in Washington. The "sunshine policy" of Kim Dae-jung was overshadowed by the heavy hand of Washington, and the economic meltdown of the North Korean economy proceeded apace, with all hopes of a "soft landing" by Pyongyang dashed on the rocks of American intransigence.

The final straw was the infamous "axis of evil" speech, in which Bush put Kim Jong Il in the same category as Saddam Hussein and essentially telegraphed to the North Koreans that their turn to be "liberated" would come soon after Iraq's. In this context, the sudden admission by the North Koreans that their nuclear program is going full-speed ahead is far from inexplicable. In deciding to come out of the nuclear closet, what did they have to lose?

As Kim Jong Il threatens to take center stage away from Saddam Hussein as the chief spoke in the Axis of Evil, the wildly differing approaches to these twin crises is being underscored by administration critics as evidence of Bushian hypocrisy. Without a smidgin of evidence that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction, the Bushies are moving toward war, while the open flaunting of nukes by Pyongyang has – so far – provoked relatively little in the way of American saber-rattling. But that could change, and, in any event, this emphasis on these disparate approaches misses an important point: it is the similarities that have more to teach U.S. policymakers and their critics.

In north Asia, as in the Middle East, the main opponents of U.S. policy are America's staunchest allies: Japan and South Korea. The reason is simple: the North Koreans have vowed to turn the South into "a sea of flames" if war breaks out, and, if Pyongyang was going to be brought down, then they might decide to take Tokyo with them. "If they were attacked, I suspect they would probably wipe out Tokyo," [says Bradley Martin](#), longtime foreign correspondent and veteran North Korea-watcher. "They hate the Japanese anyway."

North Asian skepticism about the ability of the U.S. to defend its regional satraps in the event of a conflict with North Korea is nothing new. After the U.S. was driven from Southeast Asia, the South Korean strongman General Chung-hee Park began to wonder if his own regime would share the same fate. The South Koreans decided to embark on [a nuclear weapons program of their own](#), and were stopped only after the U.S. found out and demanded an end to it. But the nuclearization of South Korea is neither desirable, nor is it necessary. From Seoul's perspective, a war against the North Korean outpost of the "axis of evil" will be waged on *their* soil, and the Japanese are no less unhappy with the [Rumsfeldian certainty](#) that the U.S. can fight a two-front war that will level Pyongyang as well as Baghdad.

Kim Dae-jung's visit to the U.S., in March 2001, was [humiliating for him, and for Korea](#): his "sunshine policy" was received in Washington with coolness bordering on outright frigidity, and all talk of détente leading to eventual reunification was abruptly dismissed by administration officials – along with the Korean President himself, who was referred to by Colin Powell during a news conference as "this man," much to the horror of the Korean media.

In an open letter to Bush released on March 26, 2001, thirty Korea experts affiliated with the Council on Foreign Relations [warned](#) that the administration's peremptory approach to North-South reunification talks would lead to trouble: "If Pyongyang is indeed ready to take further steps toward strengthening peace on the peninsula, then the United States should be

fully prepared to respond," said the letter, signed by [Robert L. Gallucci](#), chief U.S. negotiator with North Korea and now head of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, [Morton Abramowitz](#), former director of State Department intelligence and research, [James R. Lilley](#), former ambassador to China, and [Winston Lord](#), former assistant secretary of State for Asia, among others.

When the chill from Washington threatened to put the inter-Korean dialogue on ice, the European Union sent a delegation to Pyongyang in May: as Tim Beal reports, the Europeans carried two messages back to Seoul from Kim Jong Il to Kim Dae-jung:

"One was that Pyongyang would unilaterally continue with the moratorium on missile testing until 2003 and the other was that [Kim Jong Il's] return visit to Seoul was still definitely on, if the Americans came back to the table."

There are many reports that the original "axis of evil" speech referred to Iraq, Iran, and Syria, but that the latter was taken off the list because an all-Middle Eastern trinity was a bit too transparent, even for the U.S. government, and politically inconvenient. The speechwriters went back to work and came up with North Korea, a last-minute haphazard substitution that may turn out to have far-reaching albeit unintended consequences.

There is an old Korean aphorism that sums up the dangers inherent in the Korean crisis: [a cornered rat will bite the cat](#). Facing a bleak future of increasing isolation and surefire starvation, Pyongyang tried to break out of its isolation and pursue the path of dialogue with the South, only to have this thrown back in their faces by the "axis of evil" rhetoric coming out of the Bush administration. Now, in desperation, they are turning to a policy of outright confrontation, one designed to appeal to the patriotic feeling of all Koreans that only Koreans have the right to determine their own destiny. Missile testing on the part of the North Koreans – perhaps a repeat of the 1998 overflight of Japanese airspace – and other provocative actions cannot be ruled out.

The presence of 37,000 U.S. troops in South Korea, which has led to a number of clashes, is increasingly problematic. With the introduction of the nuclear factor, Kim Jong Il is, in effect, holding 37,000 Americans hostage, [a point Cato Institute policy analyst Ted Galen Carpenter makes](#) in *USA Today*.

Elsewhere, however, Carpenter makes [a somewhat different argument](#), coming out against liberals who advocate dialogue as well as conservatives who want tougher sanctions and even military action: "American hawks and doves both assume that the right U.S. policy will cause the North to give up its nuclear ambitions." He denounces "bribery" as ineffective, although perhaps [the extra \\$12 billion we're going to send to Israel](#) is better spent preventing millions of North Koreans from starving to death. He also fails to mention the one U.S. action that *could* deter the North from playing the nuclear card: complete U.S. withdrawal from the Korean peninsula. (Although, to be fair, he does raise the possibility – parenthetically and indirectly – in the *USA Today* version of his piece.)

Many commentators have pointed to the ironic disparity in the U.S. response to "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq and North Korea: we are ready to invade the former, while treating the latter with kid gloves. But this is based on a misunderstanding of the facts: there is no proof that Iraq has nuclear weapons, or anything even close, while the North Koreans are widely believed to have as many as three working nukes and are openly pursuing the acquisition of yet more. The irony here is on a deeper level.

Just as the U.S. is seeking to add another province to its overseas empire, and its policy intellectuals are [beginning to articulate](#) the concept of an American Imperium as inevitable and wonderful, the foundations of that structure are being shaken in Northern Asia, a key outpost of Empire. As we contemplate the occupation of Iraq and a hare-brained scheme to implant "democracy" where it has never taken root, the unintended consequences of yet

another failed occupation come back to haunt us – Korean ghosts rising from the graveyard of U.S. policy failures.