

explainity explains: Corean Conflict

Two siblings: Haru and Benjiro. They share the same family name; a room and they play together. Years go by and a great deal change. Benjiro turns into an outsider. Haru becomes the model son. Today the siblings are estranged.

It is a similar story with North- and South Korea. Two countries that were once one state with a joint history that is centuries old and shared traditions – now split in two by a big border - and technically “at war”.

Korea was once part of the Mongolian empire, then it was ruled by China. In 1897, Korea became an independent empire for a while, before being conquered by Japan. However, it continued to hold together and regained its independence piece by piece – just as Haru and Benjiro stuck together as teenagers when their parents gave them grief.

But then came the turning point. After Japan surrendered at the end of World War II, Korea became independent, but was divided into two zones of occupation – just like Germany back then. The Soviet Union assumed control of the north and the USA took charge of the south.

Two states were founded in 1948: South Korea as the Republic of Korea and North Korea as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Kim Il Sung became Head of state of the latter, and his family went on to lead the north from that point on.

It was then that the conflict began. North Korea tried to take over South Korea by military force. This led to the Korean War in 1950. The northern side was aided by China and the Soviet Union and the southern side by various supporters, primarily the USA and the UN. Millions of people lost their lives and lots of cities were completely destroyed.

In 1953, the countries briefly came together once again. They agreed on a ceasefire, but there was no official declaration of peace. The borders remained in place. And the political views continued to be divided.

And so it continued. At first North Korea was rich but collapsed in the 1990’s. It is ruled by a strict dictatorship and is one of the countries with the highest military expenditure in the world but also a developing country with a great deal of poverty and famine. People are oppressed and tortured. The press is also controlled by the state. South Korea, on the other hand, has developed into a democracy with a stable economy.

North Korea in particular wants to safeguard its independence and has been causing provocations since 2006 through its active nuclear weapons testing. These are not tolerated by many. But North Korean leader Kim Jong Un continues to carry out the tests. Allegedly in February 2013 a further unauthorized rocket test took place. The UN issued the country a ban on travel and had accounts blocked. As a response, North Korea, among other things, rescinded its 1953 sealed ceasefire agreement with South Korea. South Korea also resumed rearmament.

All over the world the situation between the two countries continues to cause tensions.

While North Korea has practically no close allies on its side, South Korea is finding support from the UN, the USA and Japan for example.

Many would like a peaceful settlement. Others tend to see military takeover as a solution.

North Korea continues to test nuclear weapons. Therefore, peace and reunification do not currently appear to be conceivable.

Haru and Benjiro are also still fighting. But perhaps in the end what belongs together will grow back together.

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