

University

38th Parallel North

Student's Name and Surname

Course

Professor

Due Date

38th Parallel North

When speaking about current global affairs the international community faces, one cannot avoid mentioning the relationship between South and North Korea. While being constantly on the brink of war, two parts of the same nation were historically divided and have driven different political and social courses, thus escalating the tensions between them. One should understand that to explore the roots of the conflict between North and South Korea, it is crucial to turn one's gaze in the direction of the United States as well as the former Soviet Union. More importantly, the comprehension of the historical division of Korea is necessary, as North Korea plays a critical role in finding ways of reducing military tensions on the Korean peninsula—since these tensions, if handled inadequately, can lead to a nuclear war.¹ In such a context, one should argue that the division of Korea on the 38th Parallel North is a matter of a clash of post-WWII foreign affairs of the United States and the Soviet Union—something that later led to the devastating Korean War and the Cold War. To understand the historical roots of the matter, one should focus on describing the case of the division itself, its reasons, and outcomes.

Considering the exploratory nature of the study, the methodology utilized in the research is the comparative and inductive analysis of existing literature. While using analytical reasoning as a primary tool for conducting the analysis, the author is bound to explore the case of the 38th parallel north from various perspectives, including views of the matter as it was seen by major shareholders—namely the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. Based on the insight acquired during the analysis, the event that eventually led to the Korean War and the Cold War is a matter of wrong politics—one that constituted the willingness of major global powers at that time to share spheres of influences.

¹ Richard Sokolsky, "A Road Map for Demilitarizing North Korea : Informed Analysis of North Korea," 38 North, last modified July 27, 2018, <https://www.38north.org/2018/07/rsokolsky072718/>.

The theoretical basis of the thesis revolves around the understanding of the cause-and-effect relations between the decision made by the United States and the Soviet Union and the repercussions of such an action for both Korea and the world. More specifically, the significance of the research involved in the exploration of the thesis is to show that political and historical events that subsequently put human civilization on the brink of collapse was and is a matter of decisions made by major players on the global political arena. The author hopes that such perception of the case with Korea will show that while making significant political decisions, people in power should understand the potential adverse effects of such a decision globally. In fact, world powers should consider such consequences before making substantial political moves.

Speaking about the basis used for research in literature, one cannot avoid mentioning James Irving Matray—a prominent historian, scholar, and educator. Matray is recognized as one of the most credible experts regarding Korean history. This author has published numerous books and academic articles exploring the case of the Korean division, as well as the Korean War. His book titled *Korea Divided: The 38th Parallel and the Demilitarized Zone*, as well as two academic articles, "Captive of the Cold War: The Decision to Divide Korea at the 38th Parallel," and "Truman's Plan for Victory: National Self-Determination and the Thirty-Eighth Parallel Decision in Korea" are used as a basis for the research. Along with Matray, the author found it necessary to employ the article written by Shannon McCune—a historian with a unique perspective on the outcomes of the case of 38th Parallel North.

The Case of the 38th Parallel North

According to McCune, “The 38th parallel in Korea marks a critical segment of the ‘international frontier’ between the two worlds into which our one globe seems to be dividing.”²

² Shannon McCune, "The Thirty-Eighth Parallel in Korea," *World Politic* 1, no. 2 (1949): 223.

As a result of such a division, there is an apparent separation between two spheres of influences. Namely, while going south of the line, one will witness an evident influence of the United States along with the United Nations. While going north, visible signs of Soviet influence will appear. Keeping them in mind, speaking about the fact of the division and what constitutes the division, it is crucial to say that the 38th parallel north emerged as the armistice line connecting the East Sea with Gyeonggi Bay, almost 150 miles away from the peninsula's west coast.³ Marking the division of Korea, the line became the nation's first intra-national boundary—the one that is dated back to the final moment of the World War II, when the United States along with the Soviet Union was deciding the fate of Korea that was occupied by Japan at that moment. As a result, after Japan was defeated by the Allies, the vast territories that were primarily occupied by the Japanese regime found themselves without any control. Seeking such an opportunity and fearing that some significant power will gain more global control, both the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in the separation of Korea—something that led to the emergence of the 38th parallel north as a demarcation line.⁴

It is apparent that the division of Korea into two separate entities was a matter of foreign affairs as imposed by significant shareholders in the post-WWII divisions of the world. Keeping that in mind, it is worth mentioning that Harry S. Truman, the President of the United States, participated in the creation of the 38th parallel north demarcation line, fearing that allowing the Soviet Union to have a massive chunk of Korea would eventually lead to the emergence of pro-communist forces on the peninsula. From the perspective of the Soviet Union, when the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Japan, Stalin, the Soviet leader, worried that without him directly

³ Michael Fry, "National Geographic, Korea, and the 38th Parallel," National Geographic, last modified August 4, 2013, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/08/130805-korean-war-dmz-armistice-38-parallel-geography/>.

⁴ Fry, "National Geographic, Korea, and the 38th Parallel."

engaging in the war against Japan as well as engaging in the case with Korea, America would gain too much control in Asia, and would not keep the territorial promises Roosevelt offered to Stalin at Yalta. As a result, while both powers sought their benefit in the region, they engaged in a diplomatic settlement that led to the artificial division of Korea.⁵ Following this ordeal, it is apparent that the artificial division of Korea is a matter of two significant superpowers seeking their territorial retribution after the Second World War.

Reasons Leading to the Division of Korea

After establishing the case of the 38th parallel north, it is crucial to plunge deeper into understanding the reasons behind it. From the American perspective, the proposal of the 38th parallel was about the intention to “minimize the amount of territory in the Far East to come under Russian control.”⁶ Numerous historical accounts suggest the primary reason for establishing the demarcation line, in the context of the United States, was not about economic gain but instead a matter of pure military convenience.⁷ In respect for the reasons that forced the Soviet Union to engage in the collaboration regarding the division of Korea, Matray presents evidence suggesting that for Stalin, the core intention was to preserve the Soviet Union’s national security in northeast Asia. While understanding that American influence on the Korean peninsula would result in the emergence of new political forces in Korea, the Soviet leader did not want to permit the emergence of a Korean government hostile to the ideals praised by the Soviet Union.⁸ As a result, the Soviet-American partition of Korea in 1945 can be considered as

⁵ James I. Matray, "Captive of the Cold War: The Decision to Divide Korea at the 38th Parallel," *Pacific Historical Review* 50, no. 2 (1981): 168, doi:10.2307/3638724.

⁶ Matray, "Captive of the Cold War," 147.

⁷ Matray, "Captive of the Cold War," 146.

⁸ Matray, "Captive of the Cold War," 148.

one of the most significant political outcomes of World War II. Both Washington and Moscow envisioned Korea as a potential ground for developing a particular ideology. As a result, both American and Soviet leaders tried to do everything in their capabilities for Korea to emulate either the pro-American or pro-Soviet models of national development.⁹

Futhermore, when uncovering reasons leading to the emergence of the 38th parallel, one should refer to the American State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee and the Joint Chiefs of Staff that immediately, after the surrender of Japanese forces, approved a War Department recommendation—which defined areas of responsibility regarding accepting the surrender of Japanese forces. Interestingly, in the context of such recommendations, there was an apparent remark concerning the fact that Japanese troops north of 38th degrees in Korea should surrender to Soviet forces, while forces south of the 38th parallel were to surrender to U.S. forces.¹⁰ As a result, it is evident that American forces initiated the overall partition of Korea. In this respect, the Soviet engagement into the case of the 38th parallel north was a response to the territorial claims the United States had in northeast Asia. In fact, the main reason that led to the subsequent division of the entire Korean peninsula was the political gamble made by superpowers that feared losing their grounds in the battle for spheres of influences.

Outcomes of the Division

In the context mentioned above, while understanding the reasons of the case as well as its nature, one should say that something that started as a territorial separation eventually led to the open confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union—and the Korean peninsula became their battleground. In the words of Matray, “Tragically, the result was the emergence of two Koreas, and the peninsula became a major front in the Cold War. The price of liberation for

⁹ Matray, "Captive of the Cold War," 145.

¹⁰ McCune, "The Thirty-Eighth Parallel in Korea," 223-224.

Korea was dismemberment.”¹¹ As a result of the division, after the 38th parallel was established, tensions between the powers began. Eventually, the obsession with reunification led to the outbreak of the Korean War in June of 1950. The war that is described as “the most destructive conflict in human history.”¹² In three years, more than 3 million Koreans had been killed. The war separated millions of families and officially became the starting point of the Cold War—something that brought the world on the brink of nuclear destruction.¹³ Going further, while historians argue that establishment of the 38th parallel was a matter of military precaution as well as maintenance of the prestige and credibility of the United States, for Koreans, the emergence of the demarcation line proved to have devastating effects.¹⁴ Apart from direct physical and material outcomes that happened on the peninsula, Korea became the place where the fate of the world has been decided for decades. As McCune states: “The 38th parallel, originating as a hasty military expedient and functioning as a rigid barrier despite its handicaps as a natural boundary, will probably continue as a critical boundary where friction exists, and where a serious world struggle might be precipitated at any time.”¹⁵

Considering the explanation above, one should say that McCune’s words appeared to be prophetic. Something that started as military expenditure—namely the case of sharing the territorial claims for WWII victors—eventually led to the place where the fate of the world was decided. For decades, the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union grew, and the

¹¹ Matray, "Captive of the Cold War," 145.

¹² James Irving Matray, *Korea Divided: The 38th Parallel and the Demilitarized Zone*(Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2005), 129.

¹³ Matray, *Korea Divided*, 129.

¹⁴ James I. Matray, "Truman's Plan for Victory: National Self-Determination and the Thirty-Eighth Parallel Decision in Korea," *The Journal of American History* 66, no. 2 (1979): 333, doi:10.2307/1900879.

¹⁵ McCune, "The Thirty-Eighth Parallel in Korea," 232.

establishment of the 38th parallel north was its starting point. The exploration of the 38th parallel case should be an excellent historical example of how seeking political benefit can put the world on the brink of destruction. As a result, the author hopes that the presented research will encourage people to understand the interconnectedness of the world, thus urging global powers that have a significant influence on the world order to act considering the potential repercussion of their doings on the global scale.

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