

A Tale of Two Koreas: Breaking the Vicious Circle

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Since 1948 there have existed two Koreas on the divided Korean Peninsula: North and South Korea. Both were recognized as sovereign states by the UN in 1991, and most countries of the world have normal relations with both Korean states. Only the U.S. and Japan do not recognize North Korea as a sovereign state, and South Korea is not recognized by Syria and Cuba. However, the real problem, as is examined in this paper, is the fact that the two Korean states still refuse to recognize each other, with both claiming that there should be only one nation on the Korean Peninsula.

In fact, the Korean War, some call it “the forgotten war,” is still ongoing as the two Korean states have not even signed a truce agreement. After a first attempt by the two Koreas to solve the problem through military means, which resulted in some four million deaths, the division only deepened further. The North Korean nuclear crisis and frequent military tensions on the Korean Peninsula should be understood in the context of this abnormal political situation dating back to more than six decades ago.

The Birth of Two Koreas

Immediately after the Second World War, on August 15, 1945, Korea was liberated after 35 years of Japanese occupation. But it was soon occupied by U.S. and Soviet forces, who took control of the southern and northern parts of the peninsula, respectively. The occupation forces promoted the establishment of two Korean states similar to their own: the U.S. helped to establish a democratic state called the Republic of Korea (ROK)—or South Korea—on August 15, 1948, while the Soviets helped to establish a communist state in their occupation zone called the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK)—or North Korea—on September 9, 1948. The occupation forces left the Peninsula in 1949, making Koreans independent but divided into two ideologically contrasting systems.

Both the DPRK and ROK claimed to be the only legitimate government for the whole of Korea and tried to deny the existence of the other side. The situation in East Asia was also changing drastically as the civil war in China, which started in 1946, ended in victory for the Communist Party, which gave a great boost to North Korea which had been supporting the Chinese Communists. With the approval of Stalin and Mao Zedong, the young North Korean leader Kim Il-sung started the Korean War to solve the problem of division by military means.¹ The U.S. mobilized the UN Security Council, and on the same day a resolution was issued demanding that North Korea withdraw its forces north of the 38th Parallel.

¹ Although North Korea claims that the United States and South Korea invaded the North on June 25, 1950, there is clear evidence on Kim Il Sung’s preparation for the war. See the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 14/15, Winter 2003-Spring 2004 including the “Introduction” by Kathryn Weathersby.

The U.S. intervened in the civil war between the two Koreas, with UN forces becoming involved in the first ever UN military action.² This was only possible because the Soviet Union was absent in the Security Council to protest the Republic of China (Taiwan) rather than the People's Republic of China representing China. This was the only time that a member of the Security Council was absent. The U.S. was able to intervene militarily in Korea very quickly and pushed the North Korean military beyond the 38th Parallel within a few months, as mandated by the UN resolution. The Korean civil war could have ended there, but then South Korean President Syngman Rhee also saw his chance to solve the problem of division by military means. Despite clear warnings from China not to cross the 38th Parallel, the UN forces under the command of U.S. General Douglas MacArthur marched across in October 1950.

The UN forces were able to advance to the North Korean-Chinese border without much resistance. With the end of the war seemingly close, one that would have marked a South Korean victory, more than one million Chinese voluntary forces crossed the border and entered into North Korea, pushing the UN forces southward below the 38th Parallel.³ This served to prolong the war and ultimately made it even more devastating.

After three years of bitter fighting without a clear winner but with heavy losses, and after the death of Stalin, the U.S., China, and North Korea signed the Armistice Agreement on July 27, 1953. However, South Korea refused to sign it, as it wanted to fight on until unification was achieved. The Armistice obliged the parties to seek a peace mechanism by means of a conference to eventually replace the Agreement itself; this conference was held in 1954 in Geneva. With very different sets of interests, the parties to the Korean War, including both Koreas, failed to agree on any political solution. This situation continues until today, with both North and South Korea claiming to be the sole and legitimate government for the entire Korean Peninsula.

After the Korean War, the two Koreas focused on rebuilding their war-torn countries without any contacts or exchanges with each other. This situation lasted until 1972, when, in the context of President Nixon's surprise visit to Beijing one of the objectives of which was to find a peaceful settlement to the Vietnam War, there was an auspicious opening for better relations on the Korean Peninsula.⁴

Failures of Rapprochement

North and South Korean leaders Kim Il-sung and Park Chung-hee sent their trusted envoys to Pyongyang and Seoul in 1972. These secret meetings produced the historical document called the July 4 North-South Joint Statement which stated the following principles:

² During the three years of the Korean War, military forces of these nations were allied as members of the UNC. Peak strength for the UNC was 932,964 on July 27, 1953, the day the Armistice Agreement was signed: Republic of Korea (South Korea) – 590,911; United States – 302,483; United Kingdom – 14,198; Philippines – 7,468; Thailand – 6,326; Canada – 6,146; Turkey – 5,453; Australia – 2,282; New Zealand – 1,385; Ethiopia – 1,271; Greece – 1,263; France – 1,119; Colombia – 1,068; Belgium – 900; South Africa – 826; Netherlands – 819; Luxembourg – 44. However, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, India and Italy extended only noncombat humanitarian aid.

³ On 8 October 1950, Chinese leader Mao Zedong designated the PLA North East Frontier Force as the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (PVA). The PVA under command of General Peng Dehuai entered Korea on 25 October 1950.

⁴ North and South Korea were both involved in the Vietnam War, each sending 5 000 and 300 000 of combat soldiers to their respective sides.

1. Reunification shall be achieved through independent efforts being subject to external imposition or interference;
2. Reunification shall be achieved through peaceful means, and not through use of force against one another;
3. A great national unity, as a homogeneous people, shall be sought first, transcending differences in ideas, ideologies and systems.⁵

In addition, the two sides agreed on refraining from slandering and calumniating the other side and from committing armed provocations, and on taking active measures for preventing incidents of unexpected military conflicts, in order to ease the tensions between the North and the South and create an atmosphere of mutual trust. They also agreed upon realizing a variety of exchanges in various fields to restore the severed national ties, promote mutual understanding, and to expedite an independent peaceful unification.

If they had implemented this agreement, inter-Korean relations would be in a very different state than they are today. But instead of implementing what they had agreed upon, both leaders decided to strengthen their own powers instead and further deepen divisions. South Korean President Park Chung-hee decided to stay in office by changing the constitution, while Kim Il-sung named himself as permanent president. Both totalitarian leaders put a ban on inter-Korean exchanges and mutual societal contact, thus reneging on what had been outlined in the Joint Statement. Rather, each Korea concentrated on its economic development, with South Korea surpassing North Korea in terms of the latter in the late 1970s.

It was only in the early 1990s after divided Germany had been peacefully reunited and the Eastern bloc and Soviet Union dissolved that North Korea extended its hand to South Korea. The prime ministers of both countries met in Pyongyang and Seoul, signing the Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation Between the South and the North in December 1991, and the Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in February 1992. These were extraordinary achievements, but again they failed to be implemented. The problem was that since North and South Korea failed to recognize each other, these were only expressions of good intentions, but had no legally binding status as treaties between states. Moreover, North Korea was suspected of developing a nuclear program, in the context of which the Geneva Framework Agreement was concluded between the U.S. and North Korea in October 1994.⁶

In the meantime, by the end of 1992 South Korea had improved its relations with all former socialist countries including China, which thus served to isolate North Korea. South Korea was confident that it could achieve unification on its own terms through the absorption of North Korea after its expected collapse. South Korea believed that the collapse of North Korea was inevitable, but in order to speed up the process the North had to be further isolated and pressured through sanctions. Accordingly, South Korea rejected North Korea's requests for economic aid during the

⁵ See the full text of the communique in Kim Se Jin (ed.). 1976. *Korean Unification: Source Materials with an Introduction*. Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification, p. 319-320.

⁶ The US made far-reaching political concessions, namely by dealing with North Korea directly as a state and by postponing the demand to clarify the past activities. Furthermore, the US promised not to threaten or to use nuclear weapons against North Korea and to normalize relations with North Korea. In return, North Korea promised to stop the nuclear program and to remain in the NPT. In addition North Korea promised to resume dialogue with South Korea. The greatest achievement of the Geneva Framework Agreement was, however, the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995.

prime ministerial dialogues in the early 1990s. However, Seoul has underestimated the durability of the North Korean regime which has not collapsed as many have predicted.

A new juncture in relations was initiated with the change of government in South Korea in 1998. President Kim Dae-jung unveiled his so-called sunshine policy and offered high-level dialogue to North Korea to bring about some changes in Korea. The first ever summit meeting between the two Koreas took place in June 2000. North and South Korean leaders agreed on the North–South Joint Declaration in Pyongyang on June 15, 2000,⁷ according to which:

The leaders of the South and the North, recognizing that the meeting and the summit talks were of great significance in promoting mutual understanding, developing South–North relations and realizing peaceful reunification, declared as follows:

1. The South and the North have agreed to resolve the question of reunification independently and through the joint efforts of the Korean people, who are the masters of the country.
2. For the achievement of reunification, we have agreed that there is a common element in the South's concept of a confederation and the North's formula for a loose form of federation. The South and the North agreed to promote reunification in that direction.
3. The South and the North have agreed to promptly resolve humanitarian issues such as exchange visits by separated family members and relatives on the occasion of the 15 August National Liberation Day and the question of unswerving Communists serving prison sentences in the South.
4. The South and the North have agreed to consolidate mutual trust by promoting balanced development of the national economy through economic cooperation and by stimulating cooperation and exchanges in civic, cultural, sports, health, environmental and all other fields.

But again, this declaration represented only political statements of good intentions, as both Korean states still failed to recognize each other and lay a legally binding foundation to their agreements. Thus while many expected some positive changes on the Korean Peninsula, there was no enduring improvement in bilateral relations. Nevertheless, President Kim Dae-jung received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000 and many contacts between people in North and South Korea became possible including a few showcase family reunions.

Seven years elapsed until the second summit in October 2007, which was held a few months before President Roh Moo-hyun was to leave office. President Roh Moo-hyun symbolically even walked across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) for this second summit and signed the Declaration on the Advancement of South-North Korean Relations, Peace and Prosperity in Pyongyang, which affirmed that both parties would implement the June 15 Declaration as well as implement other measures designed to enhance respect, trust, and cooperation in a number of fields.⁸

⁷ United States Institute of Peace, Peace Agreements Digital Collection. June 15, 2000, http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/resources/collections/peace_agreements/n_skorea06152000.pdf , (Accessed October 23, 2013).

⁸ United States Institute of Peace, Peace Agreements Digital Collection. October 4, 2007, http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/resources/collections/peace_agreements/n_skorea10042007.pdf , (Accessed October 23, 2013).

Unfortunately, these good intentions once again failed to be implemented and did not bring about any positive changes on the Korean Peninsula. In sum, the fundamental sticking-point of mutual non-recognition was not resolved or even discussed.

Roh Moo-hyun's successor, Lee Myung-bak, had little interest in improving relations between the two Koreas. The Mount Kumgang Tour Project was halted in 2009 and even the limited exchanges with South Korea stopped. The sinking of South Korean naval corvette, *Cheonan* on 26 March 2010 by an alleged North Korean torpedo as well as North Korea's shelling of the *Yeonpyong* Island on 23 November 2010 increased the military tension between North and South Korea drastically. During the five years of President Lee Myung-bak's administration, relations between North and South Korea reached a nadir, with military clashes and hostilities occurring along the maritime border.

President Park Geun-hye is seen by many as basically continuation of the policies of the Lee Myung-bak government, namely pressure and isolation of North Korea. She is pressuring the North to give up its nuclear program in order to receive economic support from the South. Although she claims to build trust between the two states first and has many ambitious projects such as the DMZ Peace Park and railroad links to Europe, she is not offering yet any incentives to North Korea. All of these, however, require mutual trust and respect of mutual sovereignty. These also require that North Korea feels secure enough to relinquish its nuclear weapons, intended to deter regime change.

New Thinking Needed

The two Koreas are now at a crossroads with new leaders in both countries. The daughter of former President Park Chung-hee, Park Geun-hye, was elected as President of South Korea, taking office in February 2013 with a five-year mandate until 2018. In North Korea, the third grandson, Kim Jong-un, of the founder Kim Il-sung has ruled the country since his father Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011. Both Korean leaders share the responsibility for meeting their peoples' expectations: that is to maintain the legacy of their forefathers but also to bring about changes to normalize relations and ultimately to unify the country.

In so doing, there is urgent need to move away from zero-sum thinking—rather both have to make compromises to accept each other in order to reduce military tensions on the Korean Peninsula. It is the Korean people that have the most to lose by the continued division of Korea, while the neighboring countries and the U.S. are benefiting from a divided Korea and are not unhappy with the situation. Tension on the Korean Peninsula is even beneficial to some neighbors. The US military presence in South Korea and massive import of modern weapons are viewed by North Korea as a threat its regime and South Korea also regards very existence of North Korea as a threat to its security and pay high price for the alliance with the US.

As long as Korea remains divided, neither normal political or economic development is possible. The division not only risks the stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula but also the future of its people. The unification strategies of both Koreas are contradictory and serve to cement the status quo. North Korea still hopes to unify the country by a socialist revolution in the South and South Korea hopes that collapse of the North Korean regime is coming and unification by absorption can be achieved, if China strictly apply the UN sanctions against North Korea. Without changing their thinking and strategy, it is impossible to find a lasting peace mechanism to replace the truce agreement. A new standpoint is needed.

German Lessons for Korea

The experience of divided Germany could provide invaluable lessons for Korea, as both West and East Germany had very similar policies such as ignoring and denying each other's existence that lasted from their foundation until 1969. Whereupon West Germany under Chancellor Willy Brandt changed its policy of denial and decided to recognize East Germany without giving up the goal of unification. In thus doing, the priority was to recognize each other as sovereign states and to expand exchanges between people. West Germany did not limit its people to have contacts with East Germany, but East Germany allowed only retired people to visit West Germany. East Germany, however, allowed its people to have mail and telephone contacts with West Germans.

The two German leaders, Willy Brandt and Willy Stoph, held two summit meetings, agreeing to work toward the normalization of relations and for the reduction of tensions between the two Germanies. They agreed not to talk about German unification, which only would raise suspicions and even opposition from neighboring countries. Thus the unification issue was postponed and instead peace building became the top priority. The basic treaty defining relations between the two German states was signed in 1972 and diplomatic representatives in each capital were exchanged. They finally joined the UN as full members in 1974. West Germany extended generous economic assistance to East Germany in difficult times and even encouraged even retired East Germans to visit West Germany, as young East Germans were suspected of escaping to the West and East Germany would not allow them even to visit their relatives in the West.

The political leaders of both German states were concerned about military clashes between the East and West during the Cold War and worked together to prevent war, which very likely would have been fought on German territory. With the political changes in the Soviet Union and in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, East Germans decided through their first and last democratic election to dissolve East Germany (the German Democratic Republic) and to join West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany) as five independent states, thus reuniting the country after over four decades of division. Although many East Germans especially older generation were unhappy in the beginning and felt as second class Germans, there were no losers but all Germans became winners of the political unification and started a new phase of building a strong and proud Germany. Now, after only 23 years of peaceful unification, united Germany is leading Europe economically and politically.

It is well known that President Park Geun-hye respects Germany and is a good friend of Chancellor Angela Merkel. She could learn from the German experience and apply these lessons to Korea. In particular, she should learn how both Germanies ended their confrontation and normalized relations. Some counter that Germans never fought each other in the same way Koreans did, and it is therefore difficult to compare. To this it could be argued, however, that the majority of the Korean population have also not fought each other since they were born after the Korean War. In sum, it is mainly due to German politicians on both sides that war on German soil was prevented, instead working together for peace in Europe.

The Path to Normalization

Continuing confrontation and denying the existence of North Korea cannot solve the problem; rather it only worsens the situation. Since President Park visited North Korea and met with Kim Jong Il once in 2002, North Koreans tend to believe that she has a better understanding of their

country.⁹ President Park Geun-hye is thus well placed to prioritize the building of peace and preventing military clashes between the two Koreas. The top priority of the two Korean leaders should be to end the war and peacefully restore the Korean nation by the healing of the past. To achieve these goals, President Park should show a greater flexibility in dealing with North Korea. Negotiations imply each side is willing to exchange something it has for something it wants, to achieve higher interests. In this regard, mutually agreed confidence and trust-building measures are essential.

Waiting for the collapse of one Korea is only a waste of invaluable time, while possibly losing the historic opportunity to change the situation. As the two Germanies did in the early 1970s, the two Koreas should agree on a basic treaty recognizing each other and working together in order to build peace in Korea and in the region. This will be the first step to preventing another inter-Korean military conflict which could destroy the positive legacies of building up the two Korean states by their ancestors.

North Korea firmly believes that without the U.S. intervention in Korean affairs, North Korea would have won the war of national liberation and achieved unification in their favor long ago. This is the main reason why North Korea continues to insist on making a deal with the U.S. to solve the nuclear issue. North Korea has already demonstrated its nuclear capabilities on three occasions, and it believes that the U.S. should withdraw from the Korea Peninsula and let Koreans decide on their future themselves which is purely unrealistic. President Park, therefore, must persuade Kim Jong-un that without giving up its nuclear weapons program, it is impossible to improve relations with the U.S. For this to succeed, security guarantees for North Korea to replace its “nuclear deterrent” will likely be necessary.

It should be noted here that North Korea has taken a small but important step toward acknowledging the reality of the existence of two Korean states. During the 2013 Asian Cup and Interclub Junior & Senior Weightlifting Championship held in September 2013 in Pyongyang, North Korea for the first time in its history played the South Korean national anthem and hoisted the South Korean flag six times.¹⁰ This shows that the North Korean leadership already de facto accepts the reality of the existence of South Korea.

South Korea, for its part, has also had difficulties in accepting North Korea as a sovereign state: Article 3 of its Constitution defines the whole peninsula as the territory of Republic of Korea and that North Korea has illegally occupied parts of its territory since 1948. However, South Korea has also de facto accepted the existence of North Korea since 2005, when it played the North Korean anthem and hoisted the national flag in an international event held in South Korea.¹¹ Although it does not accept North Korea as a sovereign state, it accepts the reality that North Korea is a member of the UN and an independent state competing in international events.

But more importantly, since the second summit in 2007, there has been a heated debate going on in South Korea: the conservatives blame former President Roh Moo-hyun for having given up the NLL (Northern Limit Line) during a North-South summit. The NLL was drawn by the UN

⁹ She paid a four day visit to Pyongyang and returned to Seoul via Panmunjom. She visited as a chairperson of the Europe-Korea Foundation and met with Kim Jong Il and other North Korean leaders.

¹⁰ In 2008, North Korea refused to see the South Korean flag during a qualifying match for the 2008 South Africa World Cup, which was scheduled to be held in Pyongyang, but later was moved to Shanghai, China.

¹¹ South Korea played North Korean anthem and hoisted North Korean flags during the East Asia football Game in Jeonju, Korea in 2005. Since then South Korea has frequently allowed the flying of the North Korean flag and the playing of the North Korean national anthem during international sporting events. However, outside of international sporting events, displaying the North Korean flag can cause problems.

Command to define the North-South maritime border in the West Sea. North Korea had never accepted the NLL, but it had been respecting it as the de facto maritime border between the two Koreas. Owing to the frequent maritime clashes in recent years, President Roh Moo-hyun had proposed to define the area as a peace park and to have it jointly managed by North and South Korea. Even conservatives are realizing the fact that the territory of South Korea consists of only those areas below the NLL and DMZ currently controlled by South Korea.

President Park Geun-hye can offer North Korea mutual acceptance and thus end the Korean War while delaying the unification issue to the next generation. As the two Korean states did not even sign the truce agreement in 1953, they need to declare the end of war and sign a non-aggression treaty. The foundation was already laid in 1991 during the prime ministerial meetings, and now both parties must build on this foundation and sign a basic treaty, recognizing each other as sovereign states and exchanging representatives to each capital in order to establish official relations. This is the only way to build trust, which President Park Geun-hye desires and which would bring about positive changes on the Korean Peninsula.

Once relations are normalized and clearly defined, enabling the two Koreas to coexist, they should then reduce the size of their respective militaries, so that no side can be a threat to the other. Military downscaling will free up expenditure that could be used by both Koreas to develop and strengthen their respective countries. If there is no more threat to North Korea, Pyongyang would have no reason to possess nuclear capabilities, and has stated this on numerous occasions. And vice versa, if North Korea is no longer a threat to South Korea, Seoul would have no reason to spend vast amounts of money on purchasing new and modern weapons. The two leaders should work to improve political circumstances first, so that the Korean Peninsula will no longer be a crisis region and the two Koreas can work together to build a great nation again.

The two leaders should realize that there is an emerging danger encroaching on the Korean Peninsula and should prevent Korea from becoming the next victim of the power struggle between China, Japan, Russia, and the U.S. as in the early 20th century. China, the US and Japan are exerting their influence in region and Japan is attempting to become a militarily strong nation again with full support of the US. The territorial disputes between China and Japan can ignite a major military conflict which could endanger peace and stability of the region. The two Koreas have no other alternative but to work together to prevent future confrontations and upcoming conflicts between the big powers on the Korean Peninsula.

The best security in the twenty-first century comes from economic strength and social stability, not from weapons and soldiers. Thinking about unification while waiting for the other side to collapse will not bring a solution to this old problem. Instead, the two Koreas should be proactive in finding a solution which can bring benefits to both sides. The U.S. and China are not interested in offering a solution for Korea, so it is time that the Koreans themselves accept the reality, become masters of their own fate, and find a compromise solution.

Kick-starting the Process

The two Koreas definitely need a new start after their decades-long confrontation, which has wasted valuable resources and time. Unfortunately, however, North and South Korea have found it difficult to start talking directly with each other because of domestic political constraints. Both states desperately need third-country mediation. In addition to Switzerland, Sweden is the other remaining member of the Neutral Commission setup by the UN and has access to both Koreas. Sweden could thus provide a neutral and supportive venue for North-South meetings.

A process needs to get underway until the Korean leaders reach a solution. However, since many people in both countries are still strongly against any contact with the other Korea, this has to be done without any media or public attention. The most important step, however, should be the termination of hostile relations by declaring that the Korean War is officially over by the two Koreas. The war-like situation on the Korean Peninsula hinders development of normal relations with each other and prolongs a most inhumane situation.

The leaders of the two Koreas could agree on a new relationship by accepting each other and by beginning to build mutual trust which could lead to a peace process. This will certainly not be an easy matter as the two Koreas have their own dynamics and their systems have been established based upon a 60-year-old division and antagonism. However, reconciliation and acceptance of each other will definitely help to build a more peaceful world and is essential for realizing a nuclear-weapon-free Korean Peninsula.

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