

A Post-War Korea? Broken Homeland and Wistful Diplomacy

Merose Hwang

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Merose Hwang is an Assistant Professor of History at Hiram College. She has received grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Kathryn W. Davis Fellowship for Peace, Korea Foundation's Rising Stars Program, and the Korea Foundation. She is the author of, most recently, "The Asian Motherhood Stigma: A Historical Glance at Embedded Women's Practices in Korean Colonial Media."

Koreanists watched closely last year as political outlier, Donald Trump entered a new U.S. presidency and conservative Park Geun-hye was impeached from the South Korean presidency for abuse of power and coercion. The first half of 2018 has been most dramatic, with escalating with North Korean ICBM tests, the delivery of THAAD in South Korea, enlarged U.S.-South Korean joint military exercises, U.S. threats of preemptive nuclear attacks, economic sanctions and war fallout speculations. While peninsular tensions were at an all-time high, the new liberal South Korean President, Moon Jae-in announced that a joint hockey team would compete under a North/South united flag, plummeting his approval ratings during February's Winter Olympics in Pyŏngch'ang, South Korea.

For Americans the Korean War may be a part of the distant past while it remains a daily reminder for Koreans. The Koreas have been at war for nearly 70 years as the last place on the planet still engaged in the Cold War. In 1953, a cease-fire agreement was signed to pause the war without formal resolution. That all seemed to change in the spring of this year. In late April, a milestone was set as the leaders of the divided peninsula established a declaration of peace, discussed transforming the 38th Parallel Demilitarized Zone into a Peace Park and turning the disputed West Sea into a multinational Maritime Peace Zone. Through images of state leaders holding hands, walking over DMZ lines and both sides declaring a successful outcome from their inter-Korean summit, South Korean President Moon helped quell tensions and his popularity rebounded to nearly 80%.

But, is the U.S. ready to end its face-off with North Korea? After months of nuclear brinkmanship and bravado between two antagonizing heads of state, in late April, Trump tweeted sympathizing with Kim Jŏng -un, the Chairman of the DPRK Worker' Party, calling him a "smart cookie." Kim invited Trump to a meeting to which Trump tweeted back in early May that he would be "honored" to do so. Five U.S. leaders have visited North Korea since Jimmy Carter's first visit (with Kim Jŏng-un's grandfather, Kim Il-sŭng in 1994) but Trump seems

eager to make history as the first sitting president to conduct a DPRK-U.S. summit on June 12 in Singapore.

While we have a curious and sympathetic side of Trump leading to the summit, his advisors may wish to bend his ear on some crucial historical knowledge beyond the American perspective. Having some context for North Korea's opposition to the U.S. may demonstrate Trump's wherewithal to finesse this tricky, newborn relationship. A good starting point may be to become familiar with August 15th and what this day means to Koreans. It is the only day that both the North and South celebrate simultaneously as their versions of National Liberation Day.

On this August day in 1945 the world heard the voice of Japanese Emperor Hirohito over the radio for the first time, declaring Japan's unconditional surrender, swiftly ending the Second World War. Taiwan and the Liaotung Peninsula were returned to China, Karafuto was turned over the Soviet Union administered Sakhalin, and the United States took back Micronesia. For Koreans, this surrender didn't only end a Pacific War, it also unshackled the country from 35-years of oppressive Japanese rule. This day meant liberation and independence from the empire.

While these new nations were celebrating their births, such triumphs were used to drown out the sorrows of a new reality – that the Korean nation was just mutilated. The United States Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) used August 15 to publicly announce that a 38th global latitudinal line would separate northern from southern Korea until further notice. A couple months later, the American command presented Syngman Rhee, an English-fluent, pro-U.S. candidate, to the Korean public with much pomp, symbolizing a close alliance between USAMGIK and the new Korean Democratic Party.

In the days and months that followed, Koreans protested through street demonstrations and a failed coup d'état, fearing a new chapter of American colonization was at hand. As unilateral, indigenous autonomy to shape a new Korean government became ever bleak, northerners mobilized to resist American total occupation. In July 1946, they established the North Korean Workers' Party while anti-USAMGIK demonstrations proliferated the entire southern occupation zone.

The U.S. had bigger problems to worry about. US President Truman made rehabilitating war-stricken Europe and Japan his top priority by signing the Economic Recovery Act (aka Marshall Plan, 1948-1952). He was eager to roll back the Iron Curtain that surrounded the Soviet Union in a new Cold War. In an attempt to quickly resolve the Korean problem, on May 10, 1948, the U.S. oversaw the first general election in the history of Korea. This was done to the objection of many United Nations leaders because it would exclude people situated north of the 38th Parallel. The USAMGIK plowed ahead, swiftly piecing together a South Korean national assembly, promulgating a constitution, and choosing Liberation Day to inaugurate Syngman Rhee, to become the first president of the Republic of Korea (ROK, aka South Korea).

Hopes to keep the country intact were dashed. Within a few weeks of the ROK declaration, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was established north of the demilitarized zone, retroactively applying the same day, August 15 as the founding of a new North Korea. The year was 1948, and the Korean War would not begin for another two years. This began several years

of bloodshed and mass civilian killings as people suddenly found themselves stuck on the wrong side of the 38th parallel, forever severing over a million people from their families. Although comparable data on North Korea remain unknown, recent research done on the south reveal the extent to which the new Provisional Government to the Republic of Korea under US command ordered targeted extrajudicial killings, the elimination of “Red” towns and villages starting in 1948 to wipe the south clean of Communist sympathizers.

Among those persecuted, the lucky ones managed to escape to surrounding countries with the majority settling in China and Russia. Over a million Koreans fled the peninsula in the early post-liberation years to join Mao Tse-tung’s People’s Army and to run Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang out of the Asian mainland. United with a new People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Soviet Comintern, they fought to maintain a foothold on the peninsula during and after the Korean War. The large North Korean expatriate population has been an important contender in contemporary Asian geo-politics. Some 2.3 million Koreans are estimated to live in the PRC with another half million in former USSR’s Central Asian regions. 32,000 North Korean *zainichi* make them the second largest ethnic minority group in Japan as well.

What do recent political developments mean for Koreans on the peninsula and around the world? The Demilitarized Zone has contributed to making a great proportion of Korean sojourners into permanent refugees, severing family members, displacing people from their homes for nearly 70 years. While they have gained newfound appreciation in the U.S. and find peace somewhat restored in the peninsula, among their apprehensions are the potential costs of reunification. Analysts suspect the DMZ will not disappear anytime soon but this new chapter in North Korean diplomacy makes it possible to visualize an end to the Cold War.

Kim Jōng-un flexes his diplomacy skills as never before, eagerly engaging in dialogue with China, South Korea, and now the U.S. He has invited U.S. journalists to witness the closure of North Korea’s nuclear test site later this month, to discuss the logistics of total denuclearization and to focus on the material benefits of economic cooperation. South Korean President Moon is scheduled to revisit North Korea again in the fall. Kim offered a prickly olive branch to the U.S. by saying, “The United States, though inherently hostile to North Korea, will get to know once our talk begins that I am not the kind of person who will use nuclear weapons against the South or the United States across the Pacific” (report by Yoon Young-chan, Moon’s press secretary). Peacemaking activists declare that denuclearization must also apply to the U.S. as the only way to ensure enduring global peace. They strive to make state leaders accountable to their summit promises and for these to transpire into peaceable action.