

Towards Ending the 65 Years of Armistice: Understanding the Process for Peace in Korea

An interview

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July 27, 2018 marks the 65th anniversary of the [Armistice Agreement](#) which brought about a ceasefire to the Korean War. The agreement was signed by North Korean General Nam Il representing both the Korean People's Army (KPA) as well as the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (PVA) and U.S. Army Lieutenant General Harrison, Jr. representing the United Nations Command (UNC).

While the purpose of the agreement was to “ensure a complete cessation of hostilities and of all acts of armed force in Korea until a final peaceful settlement is achieved,” the effect was an unending Korean War with decades of escalating military tension on the Korean Peninsula. And a number of arrangements made on July 27, 1953 have yet to be implemented. Most notably, the U.S. has failed to contribute a plan for withdrawing its troops within the timeframe that was discussed in Article IV of the agreement:

In order to ensure the peaceful settlement of the Korean question, the military Commanders of both sides hereby recommend to the governments of the countries concerned on both sides that, within three (3) months after the Armistice Agreement is signed and becomes effective, a political conference of a higher level of both sides be held by representatives appointed respectively to settle through negotiation the questions of the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Korea, the peaceful settlement of the Korean question, etc.

While all other foreign forces eventually withdrew, the U.S. military never left Korean soil. To this day, the U.S. has more than 28,500 of its troops stationed all over South Korea.

With the anniversary of the Armistice Agreement just around the corner, ZoominKorea spoke with [Gregory Elich](#) — member of the Solidarity Committee for Democracy and Peace in Korea and frequent contributor for ZoominKorea — about the significance of the armistice and the conditions necessary to establish permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula.

ZoominKorea: July 27 marks the 65th anniversary of North Korea (with China) and the U.S. (representing UN forces) signing the armistice to agree on a temporary ceasefire to the Korean War. Can you tell us more about the agreement — what was it supposed to do and what actually transpired following the signing?



Elich: The armistice was meant to be an interim measure to implement a ceasefire until a peace treaty would be signed. Technically speaking, then, the parties to the conflict remain at war. The armistice agreement stipulated that within three months the three sides would meet to negotiate the terms of a peaceful settlement of the war. That deadline was missed, but once the meeting did take place, the U.S. representatives were unwilling to discuss the subject of a peace treaty. Decades later, that remains the position of the United States.

On the rare occasions that U.S. media address the topic of a peace treaty, the general attitude is that the matter does not involve the United States, and dark motives are likely behind North Korea's wish to sign a peace treaty that would formally end the Korean War.

However, the United States, along with China and North Korea, committed to negotiating a peace treaty when they signed the armistice agreement. That responsibility remains with the three parties, including the U.S. No one else can formally end the Korean War, nor can any single nation do so without the agreement of the others.

ZoominKorea: Although it is critical for the American public to understand that cooperation by the U.S. is necessary to ensure permanent peace in Korea, the cooperation between North and South Korea is also immensely important in establishing meaningful and lasting peace.

How do you see the [April 27 Panmunjom Declaration](#) playing a role in ending the Korean War?

Elich: The third section of the Panmunjom Declaration explicitly states that ending the "unnatural state of armistice" and establishing a peace regime should not be delayed. The declaration identifies this as a matter of urgent concern. So in a real way, the subject of a peace treaty is now on the South Korean agenda. That will make it more difficult for the United States to dismiss the issue.



South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un embrace each other after releasing a joint statement at the truce village of Panmunjeom, Friday. / Korea Summit Press Pool

Beyond that, the Panmunjom Declaration has enormous potential for the future of the Korean Peninsula, going far beyond the signing of a peace treaty. It is interesting to note that the first article specifies that the two Koreas will determine their destiny on their own accord. The unmistakable message is that only Koreans can choose their future, not the United States. In Kim Jong-Un's eyes, that is the path the two Koreas should be following now. I am not sure the ever-cautious South Korean President Moon Jae-in is entirely on board with that perception, though, and he may feel that for the foreseeable future nothing can be done without the permission of the United States.

The declaration lays out specific measures to be taken to reduce tensions between the two Koreas and to build mutual trust. That comes as a welcome development after the damage done to relations by the two previous South Korean presidents. Of particular importance is the provision to implement the October 4, 2007 economic agreements between the two Koreas that former South Korean President Lee Myung-bak killed off. Those agreements hold great potential for the economic development of the entire peninsula. Unfortunately, no progress on those can be expected before the lifting of sanctions on North Korea.

ZoominKorea: North Korea has emphasized the importance of ending the Korean War, not only in its recent negotiations with South Korea and the U.S. but also for decades, since the Armistice Agreement. Progressive Koreans in the South and Overseas have also called for the end to the military conflict and signing of a peace treaty. To them, that is the priority.

To the majority of the Washington establishment and the U.S. media, however, denuclearization is the priority.

Indeed, there are many agreements to be made between signing the peace treaty and denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula — but what do you think is the most logical process for establishing peace in Korea?

Elich: In general, it makes logical sense for a peace treaty to be among the initial steps adopted in repairing relations. I see this mainly as cleaning up unfinished business from decades ago. There are complications, though.

As you point out, North Koreans and progressive Koreans in the South and abroad attach tremendous importance to the signing of a peace treaty. There is a good deal of hope that other benefits are inherent, such as an end to enmity and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the peninsula. I don't believe we can expect anything more from a peace treaty, in and of itself, beyond its symbolic value and the encouragement it gives to ongoing talks. After a peace treaty is signed, every other step to improve relations is a matter for further negotiation and determined struggle.

On its own, a peace treaty will not trigger a withdrawal of U.S. forces. After all, World War II ended 73 years ago, yet the U.S. military remains firmly ensconced in Germany, Japan, and Okinawa. There is no sign that the United States has any intention of ever departing.

Aside from North Korea, in the years since the Second World War the United States has officially been at peace with all of the nations it has sanctioned, threatened, subverted, bombed, and invaded. North Korea will need more solid security guarantees than a peace

treaty if it is going to denuclearize.

U.S. policymakers envision expanding the role of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) beyond the Korean Peninsula, and that will make it extremely difficult to dislodge troops from the Korean Peninsula.

Washington think tanks argue that USFK should shift from the so-called North Korea deterrence role to a regional contingency force. That is, the objective is for U.S. forces based in South Korea to be poised to intervene anywhere in Asia. This concept is in line with the Defense Department's National Defense Strategy document, which calls for "increased strategic flexibility and freedom of action." In the context of that policy, an improvement in U.S.-North Korean relations is irrelevant to regional plans for USFK.

There is the additional factor that USFK is a critical component in the overarching policy of encircling China and Russia, one which U.S. military planners are not going to relinquish willingly.

That does not mean the two Koreas should not pursue the withdrawal of USFK in talks with the United States. My point is that immediate removal of U.S. forces is improbable and the challenges should not be underestimated. At the very least, it will take a determined struggle to effect change. One of the main barriers that Korean progressives will have to overcome is that the U.S. military doesn't care what citizens in any host country think about its forces. U.S. bases have been established abroad to serve imperial interests, not those of the host countries.

For the U.S. side, signing a peace treaty would make sense as a low-cost means of demonstrating goodwill and reciprocity to its interlocutors on the North Korean side. A peace treaty obligates the United States to nothing while giving North Korea something it fervently desires. That would only improve the atmosphere in talks and hasten progress toward a final agreement.

In the months ahead, if the Trump administration proves resistant to the idea of a peace treaty, then that would probably be an indication that think tank advisors are negatively influencing the U.S. negotiating strategy.

No matter what the Trump administration decides, a peace treaty may not be in the cards in the near term. A peace treaty would require approval by a two-thirds majority in the U.S. Senate before Trump could ratify it. In the current U.S. political environment, that seems like an insurmountable hurdle. Consequently, the reality is that while a peace treaty is a logical first step, it is far more likely to take place among the final stages. The completion of denuclearization may reduce the ferocity of Senate resistance to a level that would allow approval. The Trump administration may decide to postpone the signing until late in the process so as to avoid the awkwardness of Senate disapproval during negotiations with North Korea.

I see Korean reunification as a long-term goal that can only come about after U.S.-North Korean relations have substantially improved and South Korea is better able to act in its own best interests without seeking permission from the United States. Otherwise, American interference would present too high an obstacle.

ZoominKorea: What do you make of the U.S. media and its coverage of the negotiations in

progress between the Trump administration and North Korea? Pundits as well as members of Congress (including members of the Democratic Party) have been vocal about criticizing Trump and his cabinet for the way they have been handling the negotiations with the North Korean leadership. Many have called out Trump for appeasing the North Koreans “too much.” What do you assess to be the motivation behind this? What kind of an impact could this have on the talks moving forward?

Elich: The Washington establishment is uneasy over President Trump’s erratic behavior. Indeed, one could even say there is open panic. There is concern over whether Trump can be consistently counted on to pay the expected fealty to the Washington consensus on foreign policy and prioritize the needs of large corporations and military contractors. The fear is that at some point Trump, through sheer misunderstanding and carelessness, may put at risk the entrenched “values” of aggressive militarism and global economic and political domination.

The hysterical cries of treason over Trump’s meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin are another manifestation of that panic.

There are two immediate concerns. One is that normalizing relations with North Korea would lead to a growing demand among South Koreans for U.S. forces to leave the peninsula. The other is that without North Korea as an official enemy, the pretext for stationing troops in South Korea would vanish.

One does not have to search very long among Washington think tank documents to encounter warnings that signing a peace treaty would be a trap which would remove U.S. forces from the region so that North Korea could be free to attack the South. One wonders if these analysts genuinely believe this nonsense or if that is their way of dissuading the Trump administration from agreeing to a peace treaty.

In addition to these generalized concerns, military contractors, whose lobbyists are quite active on Capitol Hill, have specific worries. Over the last five-year period, South Korea ranks second behind Saudi Arabia in the value of arms purchased from the United States. For arms manufacturers, a peaceful resolution of tensions on the Korean Peninsula would be a disastrous development that would eventually cut into future profits. Investor jitteriness was displayed when the five largest U.S. military contractors lost \$10 billion in stock market value on the day of the signing of the Panmunjom Declaration.

Vociferous complaints by Western media and politicians about the Singapore Summit and ongoing talks are intended to undermine the process and block any possibility of a diplomatic settlement.

ZoominKorea: While the U.S. media have been critical of the results of the Singapore Summit, many progressive Korean American and U.S.-based activists have welcomed this first major step to the peace process. Since more than a month has passed, how do you now assess the results of the summit?

Earlier this month, as a follow-up to the Singapore Summit, State Secretary Pompeo visited Pyongyang to further discuss the denuclearization deal. From North Korea’s perspective, the latest visit was somewhat of a [setback](#) because of the United States’ recapitulation of hardline demands for a denuclearization process similar to that of the Complete Verifiable Irreversible Denuclearization (CVID) approach that undermines the spirit of the Singapore

Summit. Pompeo, on the other hand, claimed that the meeting was conducted in good faith and he had “made progress on almost all central matters.”

With the U.S. still unable to acknowledge that it is not doing enough to build trust with North Korea, how do you foresee the negotiations to move forward?

Elich: The first point I would like to make is the fact that talks are happening at all should be regarded as a victory. Eight years of the Obama administration refusing to negotiate, followed by Trump’s bluster and threats during the first year of his administration, have done nothing positive for the region or the international situation. During that time, Washington’s attitude was that pressure and threats “haven’t worked,” therefore more pressure and threats are needed. The rational conclusion that no progress can be made without dialogue was dismissed out of hand.

Chairman Kim Jong Un made a bold move to change the narrative this year, announcing a unilateral freeze on nuclear development and missile testing, while explicitly expressing his intention to denuclearize in the context of an agreement with the U.S. Then came the demolition of North Korea’s nuclear test site. North Korea’s peace drive prompted Washington to re-engage with North Korea. In a positive response, the U.S. implemented a temporary pause in military exercises on the Korean Peninsula as long as talks continue.

Contrary to what Western critics assert, the Singapore Summit was never intended to produce a detailed agreement. The meeting was a declaration of intent to negotiate a mutually beneficial deal. Given the hostile rhetoric that dominated relations and which continues to characterize U.S. media, the summit was an essential initial step in the direction of positive change.

The various shifts in the U.S. position seem to indicate that there is a dichotomy of views within the Trump administration concerning what avenue to follow in negotiations, and each side appears to be struggling to gain the upper hand.

The default position is the unworkable notion that diplomacy should consist of making endless demands on the other party while offering little or nothing in return. However, North Korea is not negotiating from a position of weakness. In its nearly complete nuclear weapons program it has something substantial to trade. It would be a mistake to imagine that North Korea would consider giving that up without receiving anything meaningful in return.

It is the job of the U.S. media to discipline U.S. negotiators and pressure them into rejecting normal diplomatic give-and-take and stick to the pattern of making demands for unilateral concessions. This pressure may explain Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s recent assertions that sanctions will remain in place until after denuclearization is complete. Presumably, Pompeo’s recent statements are meant to reassure critics, who in any case will not be mollified by anything less than the total abandonment of diplomacy and a return to saber rattling.

It is true that the U.S. and North Korea have divergent concepts on how talks should proceed, with the U.S. expecting something along the lines of the Libyan model, where the other party must meet all U.S. demands in exchange for vague promises of future compensating measures. North Korea, quite reasonably, wants a measured, step-by-step approach, where both parties give each other something as they advance towards their

ultimate goals.

It should also be pointed out that from the North Korean perspective denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is not entirely a one-way road. It would also entail a commitment by the United States to no longer send nuclear-capable B-2 and B-52 bombers flying over the Korean Peninsula.

The main component in an agreement is a security guarantee to North Korea. Its nuclear deterrent, after all, was developed in response to the hostile policy of the U.S., as well as the vivid object lessons provided by the bombing of Yugoslavia and Libya, and the invasion of Iraq. It is difficult to imagine, though, what kind of security guarantee the United States can offer that could be trusted. A piece of paper is not going to do it. It may be that the Trump administration would be sincere in signing such a document. But the next U.S. administration may have no compunction in abandoning it. I assume that a reliable security guarantee will have to involve not only the U.S. but also Russia and China in some manner.

Despite all of the hindrances, once negotiations are seriously underway I see a real prospect of favorable results. I feel that at some point as U.S. negotiators meet with their North Korean counterparts it will become apparent that they have an opportunity to achieve their goals, but only by adopting a more even-handed approach. That realization should provide the impetus to adopt a more flexible manner. Whether or not that path is followed remains to be seen, as a more even-handed approach is sure to engender a determined backlash from the Washington establishment and U.S. media. My feeling is that the desire to achieve denuclearization will override the impact of political opposition, and there is a more than even chance of a diplomatic settlement.

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