

How America Can Help Reunite the Korean Peninsula

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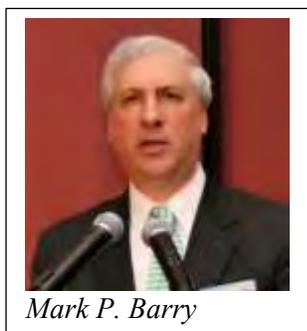


In May, Mrs. Hak Ja Han Moon, speaking in New York, asked America to fulfill its role to help reunite the Korean Peninsula. She said:

... [T]he United States needs to fulfill its responsibility. In order to do so, Korea and the Korean Peninsula needs to become the top issue for the United States. ... The homeland of God, Korea, needs to become one nation. And I hope the United States will stand on the forefront of this great task.

Now is the best opportunity yet for the U.S. to take forward-looking steps to make a breakthrough in Korea. August 15 is the 70th anniversary of Korean independence — and of the division of Korea, for which America bears a great share of responsibility. It is clear no other nation can make the difference in bringing about reunification.

Last month, the U.S. reestablished diplomatic relations with Cuba which were frozen in the Cold War since 1961. It also reached a nuclear agreement with another long-standing enemy, Iran, with the hope it will lead to an evolution in Iranian behavior. Now is the time for America to encourage, with seriousness and focus, the two Koreas and the regional powers — Japan, China and Russia — to establish permanent peace in the Peninsula.



Mark P. Barry

On July 27, the three Korean War veterans in Congress, Rep. Charles Rangel, Rep. John Conyers, and Rep. Sam Johnson, introduced legislation calling for a formal end to the Korean War. As I wrote two years ago on this blog, a peace treaty is necessary to end the 1950-53 Korean War, and is the requisite first step toward eventual reunification. Little has changed since I wrote those words. But the opportunity for the American President to take bold actions in his final year and a half in office should not be missed.

Reflections on Past American Policy towards Korea

Modern American policy toward Korea was formed, in “diplomacy that will live in infamy,” under President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt believed a westernized Japan could be an extension of Anglo-American influence in Asia, and with a senior Japanese diplomat and fellow Harvard alumnus to encourage him, he became convinced the best thing for Asia would be a strong Japan allied with America. Roosevelt also believed Japan should have Korea so that it could be a check upon Russia.

After Japan won the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese war, Teddy Roosevelt convened a peace conference in August 1905 in Portsmouth, NH (for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize). One byproduct of U.S.-Japan diplomatic discussions at the conference was an understanding the U.S. would recognize Korea to be in Japan’s sphere of influence and Japan would recognize the Philippines to be in America’s. Months later, with the U.S. looking the other way, Korea became a Japanese protectorate, and in 1910, Japan formally annexed Korea.

Japan’s colonization of Korea was a non-issue for America until after Pearl Harbor. Even in the 1943 Cairo Declaration, the wartime Allies only contemplated that Korea would receive its independence “in due course,” after a lengthy period of tutelage. Koreans were considered politically unready for

independence even after war's end.



Rep. Charles Rangel, a Korean War veteran, welcomed the Little Angels of Korea in his office on June 8, 2010. The children's folk ballet had just begun its world tour to thank veterans of the 22 nations that fought or provided assistance under the UN flag during the Korean War.

The Scramble for Asia at the End of World War II

I've written at length about the division of Korea elsewhere and will only highlight a few key points. America's role in the division of Korea was not the result of greed or naiveté. Korea was considered Japan's own backyard; but, unique among Japanese territory, it was also on the Asian mainland, bordering China and Russia.

Upon Germany's surrender in May 1945, the focus was obtaining Japan's defeat through unconditional surrender. Japan's capitulation was presumed to take until sometime in 1946 at the cost of hundreds of thousands of American lives. At the same time, after Germany's defeat, the Soviet Union agreed to enter the war by August 1945, which would hasten Japan's defeat and save American lives. But the cost of Soviet entry into the war, President Truman knew, would be very high, given Soviet behavior in occupied Eastern Europe. The atomic bomb was successfully tested in late July and Truman hoped its use against Japan would hasten its surrender and forestall Soviet entry into the Pacific war.

In summer 1945, Japan unsuccessfully sought to get the Soviet Union to mediate on its behalf with the Allied powers or at least remain neutral. Its efforts to influence the Soviets caused Japan to prolong consideration of surrender despite the American use of two atomic bombs on August 6 and August 9. Finally, on August 8, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and began Operation August Storm, with battle-hardened troops entering China the next morning. At this point, Japan began to communicate its willingness to surrender.

Events were happening at a breakneck pace in Asia, and American military planners faced the daunting task of managing fast-changing realities. Obtaining the surrender of Japanese troops throughout East Asia was the objective. Japan's home islands were the central focus of surrender, with Korea probably next in importance. Unfortunately, the ability of Soviet troops to enter and occupy the Korean Peninsula was greatly overestimated, whereas the occupation of Korea by American troops was given lower priority due to the emphasis on the surrender in Japan itself.

So it was on the fateful night of August 10, 1945 (70 years ago today) that two weary Pentagon colonels were instructed to recommend a line on the Korean Peninsula above which the USSR would receive the surrender of Japanese troops and below which the U.S. would obtain the surrender. The line was intended to facilitate the surrender of Japan's troops, *not* to denote long-term occupation zones (a four-power trusteeship for postwar Korea had been discussed earlier with Stalin). Using just a general map of Asia, they chose the 38th parallel, though other senior officers had suggested the 39th or 40th parallels.

Ironically, these two colonels were unaware that 40 years earlier, Russia and Japan had considered

dividing the Korean Peninsula into spheres of influence. Years later, one of the colonels, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, said if they knew that fact on the night of August 10 they “almost surely” would have chosen a different line. It’s also worth noting that months earlier, former President Herbert Hoover met with President Truman and told him that at the war’s conclusion it was imperative the U.S. gain control of Korea so the Russians could not get a foothold there.

It turns out many American presumptions were wrong. The Soviets, busy invading Manchuria, had barely entered northern Korea by mid-August. When Truman presented the 38th parallel line to Stalin, he accepted it — but he asked that Soviet troops occupy Japan’s northernmost island of Hokkaido, which Truman refused. In the end, it may have been possible for the U.S. to occupy most of the Korean Peninsula up to the 40th or perhaps even 41st parallel. But, these were confusing — and treacherous — times, and, as one senior American scholar said to me, “the decision on Korea was the best we could get.”

The Russians didn’t leave northern Korea until late 1948 after the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, led by Kim Il Sung, was established. With Soviet military planning and support, the Korean War began when North Korea invaded the South in June 1950. That war ended in a stalemate with a truce signed in July 1953. Technically, the two Koreas are still at war; their allies, China and the U.S., are also technically still at war. Moreover, because it fought under the UN flag, U.S. forces were joined by 15 nations in combating North Korea’s aggression.



(Top left) Vice Marshal Jo Myong Rok, First Vice Chairman of the National Defense Commission (North Korea’s number two leader), met President Bill Clinton in the White House on October 10, 2000. (Top right) Former President Clinton met Chairman Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang on August 4, 2009. (Bottom) On August 18, 2009, President Obama met in the White House with former President Clinton to discuss the latter’s meeting with Chairman Kim Jong Il (White House photo). Unfortunately, since the 1990s, high-level U.S.-DPRK engagement has been extremely brief and rare.

The Situation Today

The Korean conflict is the last vestige of the Cold War, and although South Korea has won the inter-Korean competition, understandably, North Korea will not simply capitulate. It seems clear the two Koreas are unable to accomplish peace and eventual reunification on their own. It requires the help of the international community and especially the leadership of the United States.

As I wrote on this Blog last May, it is much too easy to simply manage a conflict, especially one in which there are strong institutional interests for it to continue. For some, there indeed may be much to lose. But history moves on, and at some point in any given conflict, the costs of maintaining the status quo begin to heavily outweigh the costs of bringing constructive change. I believe that's the spirit in which Congressman Rangel and his fellow congressmen introduced legislation calling for a peace treaty in Korea.

As Unificationists, we should contact our congressmen and senators and ask them not only to support this legislation (a resolution), but also urge the President to undertake bold steps to hasten an end to the conflict in Korea. With South Korean President Park expected to meet President Obama in New York next month (and possibly later this fall for her postponed state visit to Washington), the two leaders should work together in a creative and forward-looking manner to break the political stalemate on the Peninsula.

What we can also do is support diverse grassroots efforts to raise awareness of the plight of the divided nation of Korea (the Korean War was called the "Forgotten War"). The recent Women's Federation for World Peace event in New Jersey is a good example of what can be done across the country. Moreover, our movement has successfully cosponsored events on both the East and West Coasts with Liberty in North Korea (LiNK), which works to resettle North Korean refugees in free countries and believes in grassroots change in North Korea. Choson Exchange, a Singapore-based international NGO, teaches North Koreans to become entrepreneurs.



North Korean women participate in Choson Exchange's recent "Women in Business" program in Pyongyang. CE's founder, Geoffrey See, noted: "It was inspiring to see a kinship and affinity between the Koreans and non-Koreans that I don't think I'd observed before."

Also, the Korean-American community in the United States has begun to organize politically as never before, given the elections that will be held in November 2016. There has never been a better time for the Korean-American community to make the American people and our elected representatives aware of the need to end the Korean conflict and establish permanent peace on the peninsula.

Of course, our movement can also do much more on higher levels, which would be indispensable. Our

advocacy for an Asian UN Headquarters Office in South Korea is a good idea. And we certainly hope Mrs. Moon can make a return visit to North Korea in the not-too-distant future.

It is much better to solve the problem of the division of Korea through joint diplomacy rather than wait, as some suggest, for North Korea to collapse (if it ever would), because we don't know who may pick up the pieces — and China could be the big beneficiary. South Korea's present relationship with China is uncomfortably close. There is no guarantee a collapsed North Korea will lead to a united Korea; Korea's agony could be prolonged for decades more, only in a different manner.

Upon the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation, the United States and international community should use the next three years to end Korea's division, terminate the Korean War, and restore that nation to wholeness. This was one of Reverend Moon's chief unfinished tasks. Returning from Pyongyang in December 1991, he said:

I ask the United States to be extremely careful about making threats against the right of a given people to maintain their existence. The nuclear issues involving North Korea can be resolved peacefully. This can be done if the issues are addressed in the context of a genuine dialogue conducted in the spirit of mutual respect. I traveled to Pyongyang to open the path for such dialogue, and I have returned from North Korea after opening wide that path.

It is my hope that North and South Korea will put aside their confrontational relationship. The time has come for us to come together in a spirit of reconciliation and love so that we may begin to resurrect the common heritage of our people. The time has come, as the Bible says, to beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks. We must work quickly to prepare for the future of our unified country in the coming 21st century.

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Photo at top: Reverend and Mrs. Sun Myung Moon met North Korean President Kim Il Sung in Pyongyang on December 6, 1991.