

Lessons from Rev. Moon's Trip to Pyongyang 25 Years Ago

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This week marks the 25th anniversary of Reverend and Mrs. Moon's trip to North Korea from Nov. 30 to Dec. 6, 1991. The key principle and motivation he followed in his visit to Pyongyang and meeting with the late President Kim Il Sung is that war must never again erupt on the Korean peninsula. It would be wise for policymakers in the U.S., South Korea and Japan to be reminded of that lesson today.

For Koreans old enough to remember the devastation of the Korean War, the importance of avoiding a new Korean conflict is very understandable. In fact, at the height of the original North Korean nuclear crisis in June 1994, when President Clinton was ready to dispatch advanced fighters and bombers plus 10,000 American troop reinforcements to South Korea, the person who stopped him was ROK President Kim Young Sam. His memories of the enormous tragedies of the Korean War were quite vivid (including the loss of his mother). The South Korean leader reflected that no major power, even an irreplaceable ally, can be permitted to provoke another outbreak of war on the Korean peninsula.



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Today, despite all the rhetoric about North Korea's five nuclear tests, numerous missile tests and general bellicosity, the principle of finding a peaceful solution is as relevant as in 1991. To continue on the path of increasing UN and bilateral sanctions, and even entertain talk of preemptive strikes against DPRK nuclear facilities, is a formula that will fail to get the North to back down or cooperate. Rather it increases the chances of escalation in which even a small action might be misconstrued and inadvertently trigger full-blown hostilities.

Twenty-five years ago, Rev. Moon demonstrated an approach towards a resolution of the North Korean issue in which all other parties would avoid backing the North into a corner where there would be no other option for it but resort to violence.

Sadly, Rev. Moon is inadequately appreciated for these principles he demonstrated. The Obama administration has pursued a policy of "strategic patience," synonymous with benign neglect, that has led to an increase in the North's nuclear arsenal and absence of a diplomatic relationship that had existed modestly even under the preceding Bush administration.

The incoming Trump administration might abandon the Obama administration approach towards North Korea and seek a way to irreversibly halt the North's nuclear and weapons of mass destruction programs. News reports suggest President Obama has conveyed to the President-elect that he considers North Korea the *top U.S. foreign policy priority* and the White House said it will brief the President-elect's team in

depth on the North Korean issue.

A main theme coming from Reverend and Mrs. Moon's 1991 trip to the DPRK is that issues with North Korea must be resolved not only peacefully but through sincere talks carried out in the spirit of mutual respect. Diplomatic respect is the missing ingredient in the diplomacy conducted by the United States towards North Korea since the early 1990s.

As the Summit Council's Dr. Antonio Betancourt, who met Kim Il Sung five times on behalf of Rev. Moon, phrases it, "You must treat your adversary with the respect and dignity that they may not deserve." By giving your adversary the dignity and respect you believe they may not deserve, you can then have a partner for negotiations. He adds, "Don't demonize your enemy because you may destroy the possibility of having a negotiating partner for dialogue and even peace." North Korea seeks international respect and recognition for its 70 years of achievements and for its intrinsic identity. Rev. Moon deeply understood this character of the North Koreans.



An example via the author's Twitter feed of recent calls for preemptive strikes on North Korea.

North Korea maintains it developed nuclear weapons fundamentally for security, unable to trust U.S. intentions, especially after it invaded Iraq unprovoked in 2003. But as a senior DPRK official told a visiting Unificationist leader in 2005, a minimal security guarantee can be achieved by converting an enemy into a friend. The official noted that Russian president Vladimir Putin advised the DPRK leader during his 2002 visit to Vladivostok that "you can be a friend of [President] George W. Bush." However, the official elaborated, a friendship with the United States can only be initiated at the highest levels of leadership, not the bureaucratic level of government (despite international diplomatic norms). In North Korean political culture, when the necessary trust is established with the paramount leader and he publicly gives his word, he must fulfill his promise since his word signifies the utmost commitment to his people, which he cannot break.

This approach, in fact, was partially pursued by President Clinton in his final months in office. In October 2000, North Korea's Vice Marshal Jo Myong-rok met Clinton in the White House and, in turn, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang. But because of uncertainty about the winner of the 2000 presidential election and Clinton's desire to achieve a Middle East peace agreement before leaving office, he did not make a trip to Pyongyang. Since then, senior U.S. officials in recent administrations have come to refer privately to North Korea as the "Norks" and simply maintain "we will not buy the same horse twice" in dealing with them.

In contrast, the U.S. President-elect implied he can deal with strong leaders of adversary nations, including Kim Jong Un. Under his administration, if he so chooses, what could occur would be a strategic deal in which the North freezes its nuclear and missile programs while the United States begins negotiations on a peace treaty (including South Korea and China) to formally end the Korean War, and agrees to normalize diplomatic relations. U.S. officials dislike even seriously talking about a peace treaty because, in their view, it is a gimmick for North Korea to obtain international legitimacy. Yet, the 1953 Armistice Agreement stipulated that an international high-level political conference would be held three

months later to finalize a peace agreement for the Korean Peninsula; the Geneva Conference in May 1954 belatedly attempted to do that, but was unsuccessful.

In 1991, Rev. Moon hoped his trip to Pyongyang would soon lead to resolution of the nuclear issue and the first steps toward eventual reunification of the two Koreas. Indeed, incremental progress – however bumpy – did occur. Though the first nuclear crisis reached a peak in June 1994, it was defused when former President Jimmy Carter made a private trip to Pyongyang to meet Kim Il Sung. Carter negotiated a freeze of the North's nuclear program in exchange for the provision of alternative and proliferation-resistant forms of energy. The Clinton administration then undertook months of detailed negotiations with the North Koreans to finalize the deal and concluded the October 1994 Agreed Framework that froze the North's plutonium program.

In July 1994, Kim Il Sung unexpectedly died, leaving his son, Kim Jong Il, as successor. Kim's passing was unfortunate given he had committed to Carter to hold a summit meeting with South Korean President Kim Young Sam later that summer. But more unfortunate was the South Korean leader chose not to issue even pro forma condolences upon his North Korean counterpart's death (much less attend or send representatives to the state funeral), and instead allowed his government to brand Kim Il Sung a war criminal. What had been a major window of opportunity quickly disintegrated into seriously damaged inter-Korean relations that lasted through the end of the decade.

The first inter-Korean summit occurred in June 2000 between Kim Jong Il and ROK President Kim Dae Jung, but that historic meeting was overshadowed when the George W. Bush administration came to office, which sought to distance itself from the policies of the Clinton administration. The U.S. effectively terminated the Agreed Framework with the DPRK by October 2002, alleging cheating; yet these issues could have been resolved quietly without unilateral abrogation of the agreement. With the demise of the Agreed Framework, the North's first test of a nuclear device in 2006, and subsequent launches of dozens of intermediate and long-range missiles, the Clinton administration's modest achievements were erased. Upon the death of Kim Jong Il in 2011, North Korea became preoccupied with sheer survival and third generation leadership succession to the considerably younger Kim Jong Un, grandson of Kim Il Sung.



A video screenshot of Reverend Moon addressing senior DPRK officials at Mansudae Assembly Hall, the national parliament building, on Dec. 2, 1991

Had the ROK government seen Rev. Moon's initiative toward the DPRK in 1991 as something it could work with — an initiative that had a profound impact on inter-Korean relations with the signing of the Basic Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression and Exchanges and Cooperation on Dec. 13, 1991 — prospects for peace on the Korean peninsula would have been much more promising.

The window of opportunity open in 1992-94 did not return. While new opportunities may arise, experts contend too much has changed to expect the North Korean issue can be dealt with as in the early 1990s. Rev. Moon passed away in 2012 and never made a second visit to Pyongyang. However, his widow, Mrs. Hak Ja Han Moon, may have such an opportunity at the

right time.

From 2013, modest efforts to explore Korean peninsula issues as part of larger fora were undertaken by a few Unification movement entities, bringing several well-known speakers. But most helpful now would be for the Unification movement to encourage a multinational effort, with particular involvement of Americans, to address the sorry state of inter-Korean relations and the tensions inflicted upon the international system by North Korea. Given Mrs. Moon's revival of the International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences, and creation of the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace, perhaps a major effort to improve inter-Korean relations will soon emerge. The policies of South Korea, the United States, Japan, and even Russia and China all need to be addressed.

However, the Park Geun-hye government in Seoul is now in serious trouble due to scandals and may not last far into 2017. She has offered to resign but only if the timing and method is left to the elected National Assembly. If she were to resign or be impeached, a new president must be elected within 60 days. President Park also called President-elect Trump to speak about the Korean Peninsula one day after his election victory.

To follow Rev. Moon's principles by which he met President Kim Il Sung 25 years ago implies not merely emulating the work of other organizations but demonstrating a new and innovative approach that

others either fail to realize or are afraid to undertake. Such an effort by the Unification movement may require substantial — but not exorbitant — resources, as well as the imagination and willingness to pierce through the intransigence which has kept peace from Korea since 1953.

Rev. Moon's approaches to Kim Il Sung — as well as Soviet President Gorbachev — fly in the face of the predominant conduct of international relations by the major powers, particularly since the new millennium. Rev. and Mrs. Moon stand for genuine principles of peace, respect and reconciliation, while some of the major powers in Northeast Asia have over-demonstrated the use of force rather than reliance on diplomacy as the first resort.

In the next four years, by 2020, there may be an opportunity for permanent peace on the Korean peninsula, putting to rest over seven decades of division and war. But to achieve that we need to appreciate and incorporate the lessons of Rev. Moon's trip to Pyongyang 25 years ago.

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Photo at top: Reverend and Mrs. Moon met President Kim Il Sung, joined by Dr. and Mrs. Bo Hi Pak (then-Chairman, Segye Ilbo), their entourage, and senior DPRK officials, in Hamhung City on Dec. 6, 1991.