Achieving Peacebuilding in the Peninsula: North and South Korea’s Ticking Time Bomb

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For peace is not the mere absence of war, but a virtue based on strength of mind… A free people is led more by hope than fear, a conquered people more by fear than hope; for the former seeks to improve its life, the latter seeks to avoid death. – Baruch Spinoza, Political Treatise

The indefinite armistice in the Korean Peninsula has not only pulled a lot of strings, but also provoked several emotions and situations on both sides – with peace not being one of it. Shots have not been fired in the Peninsula for more than seven decades, but the Korean War is yet to be over. While South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean Leader Kim Jong-un displayed cordial relationship in various inter-Korean summits over the past two years, the social realities of Seoul and Pyongyang paints a completely different picture than what the two men are showing.

Despite speaking similar language, practicing almost identical cultural traditions, and having related familial ties, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) are still technically at war with each other. Serving as a backdrop of Cold War hostility, the three-year Korean War left both countries in shambles. Tensions brought by the Cold War wreaked havoc among the two nations transforming them into separate and fiercely polarized countries. The conflict ended with an indefinite armistice, and not a treaty in 1953. Instead of fostering a state of peace in the Peninsula, the armistice ushered a deadlier war marked by espionage, distrust, and threats on both sides. Now, the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) stands not only as among the world’s heavily fortified places but remains as the last hold-over of Soviet-style communism.

Tension between Pyeongyang and Seoul could somehow be attributed to the absence of peace treaty between the two Koreas. The autocratic regime legitimizes its own nuclear arsenal due to the technically unresolved Korean War. North Korea’s weapons of mass destructions (WMD) have been continuously posing serious threats to the fragile state of peace in South Korea and its neighboring Northeast Asian countries over the past few decades. The autocratic regime owns around 30 to 40 nuclear weapons and other undisclosed number of deadly weapons. The long-standing history of suspicion and mistrust between the two Koreas proved to be a hurdle in achieving tangible peace over the past decades.

Achieving peace normalization through periodical diplomatic negotiations and tension-reduction initiatives to ameliorate the fragile state of peace reigning between North and South Korea have ebbed and flowed over the decades. In 1954, the DPRK envisioned of replacing the 1953 Armistice Agreement with a legally binding peace system. Followed by the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework, with the United States and North Korea as its signatories. The agreement posits that the two Korea “will move toward full normalization of political and economic relations.” Similarly, the 2000 inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang became unprecedented in the history of

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post-Korean War as the meeting resulted into a “de facto peaceful coexistence” across the region. Originating at a state of animosity during the 1950s, relationship between the two Koreas shifted into an era of cautious negotiation in the 1980s, to an increasing engagement at the start of the twenty first century.

Overcoming seventy years of animosity between the two Koreas will certainly be a difficult process, as it will require facilitating a middle ground for two societies leaning towards extreme utopias to safely exist. Albeit South values freedom and individuality, the intensity of the competitive environment has driven some of its populace to the brink of mental exhaustion. Meanwhile, North’s penchant for harmonious communitarian society results into neglect of personal liberty. Stories of adverse living conditions in Pyeongyang have also spiked due to the testimonies of defectors over the past few decades.

Living through daily paranoia on both sides of the demilitarized zone causes more harm than good among all Koreans. For one, a spur-of-the-moment military confrontation along the DMZ or on the disputed maritime border in Yellow Sea (or West Sea in South Korea) could always escalate into a full-scale aggression. On the flip side of the coin, military attacks to the DPRK could result into catastrophic chemical spillage.

Unveiling security blueprint for the Korean Peninsula

Peace must be viewed as a lengthy and dynamic undertaking, not as a one-off event. Although North and South have been committed in putting an end to the armistice, their irreconcilable views in establishing peace have turned diplomatic initiatives and engagements into a deadlock for a few times in a row now. While Pyeongyang asserts that Washington must intervene in peacebuilding efforts, Seoul prefers that the problem must be solved mostly without help from other nations. The stark difference on their preferred method on peacebuilding efforts once again places the two Koreas’ fragile state of security in peril.

In cultivating middle ground between the two Koreas, a three-step approach would be beneficial in the process: formation and reconciliation, negotiation, and compliance and integration. Formation and reconciliation involves finding the right stakeholders, fostering proper avenue for the discourse, and setting the overall mood for the peacebuilding process. Systematic steps of engagement with Pyeongyang instead of directly attempting to strip the regime of their nuclear arsenal defines this stage. Negotiation entails proper engagement of all parties, specifically major powers, in achieving security and stability in the Peninsula. Lastly, compliance and integration not only require continuous follow-ups on Pyeongyang and Seoul, but also seeking help from other Southeast Asian countries in maintaining peace in the region.

Peacebuilding calls for a necessity in creating comprehensive set of agreements, declarations, framework, processes, rules, and institutions covering social, economic, and diplomatic domains. All of which must be founded based on reciprocity and proportionality. That in which each country will not have to compromise for the benefit of another. The interested parties should also agree with matters that will be discussed during the negotiation stage to avoid blindsiding others. Fostering an open and inclusive environment for the DPRK to become loose on its diplomatic policies and stance will likely perform an essential role in the overarching direction of the peacebuilding process.

Laying the foundations for stability and security in the Korean Peninsula

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Establishing formation and conciliation in the Peninsula would require ending the state of hostility, caused by the Korean War, and was cemented by the armistice agreement. An end-of-war declaration, signed by the North Korea, South Korea, the US, China, and possibly Russia, could play a crucial role in formally ending the Korean War. All signatories of the proposed armistice must participate in this process to reinforce more legitimacy and to lift sanctions if needed. While Pyeongyang has long been antagonistic towards Washington and vice-versa, the role of the US in the process is crucial as it became a signatory for the 16 allied nations that joined the Korean War.

Choosing the stakeholders in helping achieve peacebuilding in the Peninsula and in normalizing its relations after a long period of isolation would be beneficial for the process as it could potentially set the mood for the succeeding steps in the peace settlement. Additionally, intervention from superpowers can help in security cooperation while developing nations can give guidance on Pyeongyang’s economic integration.

All participating nations shall treat one another as equals and shall always respect the sovereignty of each other during the peacebuilding process, which is based upon the 1992 Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression and Exchanges, and Cooperation between the North and the South. The rule puts forward that “South and North Korea shall resolve peacefully, through dialogue and negotiation, any differences of views and disputes arising between them.”

Similarly, the United Nations can bolster a favorable setting and encourage discourse during decision-making and policy-making sessions. The international organization could perform the role of either being “a mediator or a conciliator,” since both Pyeongyang and Seoul hold UN membership, to further dialogue and cooperation between the two countries. The UN brought the Korean War to a close through the 1953 Armistice Agreement. The UN should guarantee that the peacebuilding process in the Peninsula would not transform into a power tripping circus involving the US, China, Russia, and Japan.

Incremental steps shall be at the core of the formation and conciliation process as it sets the mood for the next phases. Small favors and seemingly insignificant concessions are needed in this process as it will serve as an indicator for North Korea’s willingness in moving forward in the process. The first step shall be treated as a honeymoon stage for it will be short but filled with promises. Creating favorable conditions for Pyeongyang, including gradually removing perceptions of threat, must be properly addressed during this process for genuine peacebuilding to effectuate.

Over the past decades, Pyeongyang and Seoul has produced their own version of history. With each version painting the other as a lesser Korea and an enemy of the state. Both sides blame that the other side caused the war. Both sides claim to be the lesser evil than the other. Both societies inevitably contain ugly and bright sides. The better Korea exists purely as a chimerical notion. Unquestionably, a favorable inter-Korean environment would have to reside between the two extremes.

Cultivating cooperation, compliance through commitment and engagement

Normalizing and sustaining peace across the region entails more than non-usage of nuclear weapons, but gradual and complete dismantling of an operational nuclear arsenal. The existence of a nuclear arsenal in Pyeongyang should be addressed properly before a proper peace treaty should follow. North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, along with its nuclear capability, has been

12 Ri Su-yong and Park Soo-gil. 1992. “Agreement on reconciliation, non-aggression and exchanges and cooperation between South and North.”
14 Chang 2010, 194.
threatening South Korea and its neighboring Northeast Asian nations since the beginning of Cold War. Though the inclination of Seoul in owning nuclear weapons should not be discounted too.

For the past seventy years, many formats of diplomatic engagement and negotiations, including bilateral and Six-Party Talks have been set-up to normalize relations between the DPRK and the ROK. Eventually, a multilateral format, together with old and new set of parties, can be established to achieve peacebuilding in the region. The Permanent Five countries, namely the US, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, and China, plus Germany could spearhead the negotiations. The discovery of an allegedly functioning uranium enrichment facility in Iran over two decades ago contributed to the rise of the P5+1. Since then, the P5+1 has been working together to neutralize the nuclear activity in the Islamic country. Undeniably, P5+1 could offer their expertise on nuclear arsenal as they have prior experience due to dealing with Iran nuclear crisis.

Consequently, the P5+1 could impose a cap on the DPRK’s existing nuclear weapons program. The group could also act as a mediator should tensions escalate between Pyeongyang and Seoul. It could likewise secure humanitarian, health, and economic aid in exchange of North Korea’s cooperation through routine inspections, verification procedures, and ultimately, gradual disarmament.

Alternatively, the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany or the 2+4 Treaty can be a pattern of the Korean Peninsula in dealing with the DPRK’s military capability and nuclear arsenal. The 2+4 Treaty forwarded that the German army must not be more than 370,000 personnel. It upheld that a unified Germany would reject “nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.” It also prohibited foreign armed forces. Hence, the DPRK and the ROK must create their own 2+4 Treaty with the conditions being contingent upon the inter-Korean situation.

Conducting multi-layered approach in negotiations with North Korea could serve as a litmus test in evaluating “Pyeongyang’s sincerity and its willingness” to peacebuilding and possibly, reunification with South in the future. On the other hand, countries involved in talks should codify laws, rules, and regulations to have unified and solid response on matters related to peacebuilding. During this process, incentives can be handed out to Pyeongyang in intervals. Similarly, aid packages must be dependent upon its cooperation with the peacebuilding process.

Throughout the years, the DPRK has mastered the art of turning a disadvantageous position into their benefit. As a result, nations that will be involved in the Korean peacebuilding initiatives should follow a universal protocol on policy and decision-making processes. In the long run, negotiations founded on mutual trust could be a "steppingstone for the establishment of a peace framework on the Korean Peninsula." Eradicating the perception of a threat while cultivating a relatively safe environment among the North Koreans could lead to favorable peace agreement discussions.

Ideally, the peace agreement between North and South must allow more leeway than the existing armistice. Conversely, replacing the armistice should not only means ending the outright tension between the two Koreas, but also seeking to avert the eruption of another conflict. As former Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan outlines, "Peace treaty negotiations are basically

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17 Ibid.
19 Klingner. 2011, 75.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Cossa, Ralph. 2018. "Korea summit: is Kim Jong-un sincere? Here’s how to tell.” South China Morning Post, April 23.
23 Ibid.
significant only when denuclearization is successful. It is illogical to discuss peace treaty and denuclearization issues simultaneously.” 24 On the same page, peacebuilding and nuclear disarmament should be treated as synchronous and interrelated entities. Gradual phasing out of nuclear weapons, specifically its means of production and delivery should be a definitive goal instead of mere denuclearization. Lastly, the progress of peace negotiations largely depends on the stakeholders’ commitment in addressing the gradual removal of Pyongyang’s nuclear arsenal.

Unexpected roles of “humanitarian” states, developing nations

Countries with little to no history of intervention with the Korean War and with the initiatives that came after the armistice could offer a more impartial posture in the pursuit of peace in the region. Utilizing non-aligned nations, including Canada and India, during the peacebuilding initiatives would certainly bring positive effects to the table as their participations can be seen as not being marred by personal interests.

The Canadian government only sent a small number of reinforcements, mostly due to orders by UN, on behalf of South Korea during the war. 25 The active participation of Canada to multilateral engagements and humanitarian initiatives could justify the country’s hypothetical involvement in the Korean peacebuilding. In case there needs to be a UN peace-keeping operations team in the Peninsula, non-aligned countries with the deliberate exclusion of major powers can play a small but consequential role in maintaining peace and stability in the Peninsula.

Similarly, cordial and deep relations between Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the two Koreas could contribute to the dynamics of peacebuilding in the region. The relationship between ASEAN and Pyeongyang exists for decades now, unlike European institutions and Western countries. North Korean Founder Kim Il-sung enjoyed amicable relations with previous ASEAN leaders, including Cambodian leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk and Indonesian President Sukarno. 26 Meanwhile, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung had been known as an active supporter of Aung San Suu Kyi during the 1990s. 27 Notably, some of the DPRK’s top 10 trading partners are Southeast Asian nations, namely the Philippines, 28 Thailand, 29 and Singapore. 30 For this reason, ASEAN boasts an extensive connection with the two Koreas aside from China.

Pyeongyang can learn from previous experiences of Vietnam and Myanmar. Both have experienced reopening their economies after a long period of isolation and open hostility to foreign countries. The two nations are more than capable in helping North Korea in its gradual integration in social, economic, and international spheres. More importantly, the DPRK will not have to worry about power dynamics with the ASEAN as opposed to Western stakeholders. The comfortable relationship and the trust between Southeast Asian nations and the two Koreas can encourage Pyeongyang’s integration during the peacebuilding process.

The possible participation of “humanitarian” states, along with small and medium-powered nations, will inarguably change the landscape of peacebuilding in the region. It presents an alternative approach in solving the seventy-year long Korean conflict. That which disqualifies nations with an off-putting history in settling the tension between the two Koreas. The autocratic Pyeongyang has been antagonistic towards the US since the Cold War. 31 The US is also a known

30 Lee, U-wen. 2018. “Singapore-North Korea trade can grow if UN sanctions are lifted, says PM.” Business Times, June 11.
South Korean backer. Japan has a record of being unwelcoming among Koreans, not to mention their history of brutality during the Japanese rule in Korea. Lastly, China and Russia are largely driven by their desire to maintain power and support the status quo in the Peninsula, since fall of North Korean regime would drive refugees into their countries. In a sense, how can a country known for having tainted reputation in either Korea make a neutral decision that can benefit the two warring states? That is when the Southeast Asian countries and non-aligned nations will play the part.

Transforming the last vestige of Cold War into a peace zone

The notion of common security among the two Koreas must be at the center in achieving peacebuilding. For over half a century, the Korean DMZ stands as a tangible manifestation and symbol of the enduring conflict between North and South. During the process, efforts must be given to transform the DMZ from one of the most heavily armed land borders into a portal of “exchange and cooperation.” Separation has long been deep-seated in the minds of North and South Koreans. Thereby, amplifying peace in the Peninsula goes beyond curating peace villages and monuments, but also creating an alternative narrative for every Korean: a safer and a more peaceful one.

Attaining security and stability in the Peninsula will not only be a win among Koreans, but also benefits the international community in the long run. On a deeper level, efforts in addressing and eliminating possession of nuclear arsenal in the Peninsula could revive talks in nuclear non-proliferation at a global level, as all arms races are contingent upon nuclear weapon states. There is no nuclear competition between developing nations which is evidenced by how Pyeongyang secured its nuclear program.

The nuclear weapons program of Pyeongyang started out small and with the help of its fiercest ally, the Soviet Union. Through their advanced nuclear technology at that time – the socialist empire had a hand in developing North Korea’s own nuclear arsenal. As time passes, the DPRK learned reverse engineering using a Soviet-era missile from Egypt for their nuclear devices. The year 2006 marked a milestone in the North after DPRK learned reverse engineering using a Soviet socialist empire had a hand in developing North Korea's fiercest ally, the Soviet Union.

While the concern for Kim regime’s nuclear capability has spiked recently due to reports that Alaska now sits within the range of a North Korean missile, the concern is decades old. History would suggest that Korea had been grappling with the threat of nuclear weapons ever since the beginning of the twentieth century. Contrary to popular accounts, it did not start when former President Park Chung-hee attempted to build South Korea’s own nuclear weapon in 1977 nor did it begin in the 1950s when Kim Il-sung started working to attain nuclear capability. Ironically, Korea’s inextricably tied relationship with nuclear technology began in 1945, when around 50,000 Koreans were either burned to death or severely injured during a nuclear strike in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Accordingly, containing Pyeongyang’s nuclear weapons would certainly send ripples on dealing with global non-proliferation and securing global security as major powers and rogue states continue to obtain nuclear weapons.

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33 Bedeski 2000, 556.
36 Ibid.
38 Hayes, Peter and Chung-in Moon. 2011. “Park Chung-hee, the CIA and the bomb.” East Asia Forum, October 17.
Pyeongyang and Seoul are historically and culturally connected but the two have seriously drifted since the war. Similarly, majority of Koreans continues to bear the emotional brunt of the divided Koreas. Many families are still separated with little to no hopes of reuniting with their loved ones. Yearly, around 3,000 elderly South Koreans die without seeing their long-lost families in the North.\textsuperscript{41} Not long after the last generation of Koreans separated by the war have perished, the emotional connection between North and South Koreans will wean off and either side will feel alienated towards the other.

The irony of peacebuilding between the two Koreas lies with the idea that while the DPRK and the ROK operate as separate states, the conscious coming together of other foreign countries could contribute to achieving peace in the Peninsula. In this manner, peacebuilding in the region must not be viewed as an avenue of power tripping but the process must be done out of goodwill. Gradual steps in reducing tension and fostering trust in Pyeongyang must be at the core of the process. Each stakeholder must be serious in offering concessions and engaging in negotiations with North and South.

Laying a concrete and systematic framework, choosing the right parties, identifying the right timing and manner, along with the appropriate mechanisms must be taken into consideration for a holistic peacebuilding process. Violence could not solve another escalating war. Solving the Korean conflict through violence would be hypocritical towards the outcome that the two parties’ desire to achieve. Even though a semblance of peace has been dominating between the two Koreas since the new millennium, treating peacebuilding as an afterthought endangers the lives of every Korean. The indefinite fragile state of peace in the Peninsula has gone off too long that North and South struggle to find their common ground. Leaving the situation as it is for the next few decades endangers the chance of achieving genuine peace in the Peninsula. Pyeongyang and Seoul have a lot of catching up to do and time is growing short.

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References


