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**The Evolving Situation on the Korean Peninsula
Time for a Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone?**

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On 14 June 2003 I was part of an international delegation visiting the Demilitarized Zone to celebrate the reconnection of the railroad tracks at Dorasan Station on the 38th parallel, for the first time since 1948.¹ Although it was a rainy day, spirits were high, and balloons were in the air. A festive rally with music and speakers was held. Hope was in the air, even though relations between the DPRK and the United States were rapidly deteriorating, and the DPRK had recently withdrawn from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Why?

Like President Moon Jae-in now, in 2003 ROK's new President Roh Moo-hyun, backed by a popular grassroots movement, had vowed to continue his predecessor Kim Dae-jung's unconditional engagement with the DPRK, with the goal of "peace and prosperity" on the Korean Peninsula. Despite the DPRK's suspected nuclear ambitions, Roh ruled out the use of military force and opposed sanctions. He also sought an independent but equal relationship with the U.S.²

In reading the paper I presented two days later at an International Symposium for World Peace in Seoul, I was struck by many other modern historical resonances with the current situation.

U.S. nuclear threats against the DPRK are not new. On July 11, 1993, President Bill Clinton stood at "the Bridge of No Return" on the ROK side of the Demilitarized Zone looking north across the border and threatened the DPRK with nuclear retaliation if they ever used nuclear weapons. His exact words were: "[I]t will be the end of their country."

The U.S. and DPRK stepped back from the brink that time and negotiated the 1994 Agreed Framework. However, it later came to light that the Clinton Administration had threatened the DPRK in June 1994 and drawn up plans for a *preemptive* attack on its nuclear reactors.

At the end of the Clinton Administration in 2000 a U.S.-DPRK Joint Communiqué was issued which included a statement that "neither government would have hostile intent toward the other." However, relations started to sour when the construction of light water reactors promised by the U.S. in the 1994 Agreement stalled and its pledges to normalize political and economic relations were not realized.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC changed everything. In frighteningly short order the new Bush Administration launched a bellicose, open-ended "war on terror." In his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush made his notorious declaration that DPRK, Iran and Iraq constituted an "axis of evil."

In testimony to Congress on June 4, 2003, Bush's Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, John Bolton – *the same John Bolton who is now President Trump's National Security Advisor*, warned: “Not only are we dealing with a country that has repeatedly violated its international nonproliferation obligations, but we also face the prospect that North Korea could produce and then export fissile material or weapons to rogue states or terrorists. This is a danger that cannot be ignored.”

Bolton also charged DPRK with selling missiles and related technologies to “countries of concern,” and asserted that DPRK had an active program to develop biological weapons, in violation of the Biological Weapons Convention, and a chemical weapons capability. He went on to call for a “forward” policy on proliferation that expands the doctrine of preemptive self-defense in a new direction.

In a June 2006 Washington Post editorial, President Bill Clinton's Secretary of Defense, William Perry (the same William Perry now advocating nuclear disarmament), and assistant Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, called for a preemptive U.S. strike on a suspected DPRK long-range ballistic missile being prepared for testing, *even at the risk of igniting a war on the Korean peninsula*. Fortunately, the Bush administration rejected this call, opting instead for diplomacy.

Enter Donald Trump. It cannot be denied that Donald Trump is a dangerous unhinged megalomaniac, unfit for office, who is taking a wrecking ball to the domestic and international orders. Yet, in a stunning sequence of events he swung at breakneck speed from threatening, on 8 August 2017: “**North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States.... They will be met with fire, fury and frankly power the likes of which this world has never seen before**”, to holding a summit with Kim Jung-un in Singapore just ten months later – the *first-ever* meeting between leaders of the U.S. and the DPRK, to professing on September 29, 2018 that he and Kim Jung-un “*fell in love*”.³

Unfortunately, Trump could just as easily swing back. Thus, it is more important than ever that peace forces everywhere work to support the diplomatic opening that has appeared.

Most of the credit for creating this diplomatic opening belongs to ROK President Moon Jae-in, with the backing of the Candlelight Revolution. Yet despite all his negative attributes, President Trump has made a positive contribution by bypassing traditional modes of diplomacy and barging ahead.

However, Trump is not operating in a vacuum. He is part of a “national security” establishment which, as I have briefly outlined, has been consistently unwilling or unable to broker normalized relations and a lasting peace with the DPRK for decades. And he has surrounded himself with hard-line militarists: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo; Secretary of Defense James Mattis; UN Ambassador Niki Haley; and of course, National Security Advisor John Bolton.

In a recent interview with the ultra-rightwing Breitbart news, John Bolton stated: “I think the combination of the potential use of military force against North Korea and the maximum pressure campaign that the president waged on the economic front is what has brought Kim

Jong-un to the table.... We'll see a meeting, I think, between Chairman Kim and President Trump sometime in the next couple of months.... The president has held the door open for North Korea. He gave them a great, little movie in Singapore when he met with Kim Jong-un that showed with North Korea's future could be. So, the door's open. They need to de-nuclearize completely and irreversibly. And if they do that and walk through the door, the future could be very different for the North Korean people."

Bolton added, "The future remains uncertain on the president's diplomacy. He's optimistic. He presses hard. He does not have stars in his eyes about this. Neither does Mike Pompeo, neither does Jim Mattis, neither do I."⁴

On a somewhat more hopeful note, General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on 6 November told **Stars and Stripes**, a Department of Defense-authorized military newspaper, that the U.S. will have to change its military posture on the Korean Peninsula if nuclear talks with North Korea progress. He explained that while the military remains ready to respond to any threats from the DPRK, its main role is to support the diplomatic process that began earlier this year. "Frankly", he said, "the more successful we are in the diplomatic track, the more uncomfortable we will be in the military space".⁵

While the U.S. has temporarily suspended major war drills with the ROK military and the DPRK has suspended its nuclear and missile tests, U.S. diplomacy with the DPRK appears to be stalled, and some of the harsh rhetoric has returned.

A meeting scheduled for November 8 in New York between U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and his DPRK counterpart was suddenly cancelled, apparently by the DPRK. No reason was given.⁶ Trump responded that the meeting would be rescheduled and insisted, "we're very happy with how it's going with North Korea," adding that he expects to meet again with Kim early next year. "We're in no rush," he said. "*The sanctions are on. The missiles have stopped, the rockets have stopped. The hostages are home.*"⁷

This is a really interesting sideways acknowledgement that the DPRK has indeed made progress on pledges made in the Singapore Joint Statement. But it also reaffirms the U.S. commitment to maintaining harsh economic sanctions.

Since the Singapore Summit it has become clear that the U.S. and the DPRK have very different understandings of what they agreed to. Each side claims that it has given up more than the other. As clearly stated by John Bolton, the U.S. expects the DPRK to denuclearize "completely and irreversibly" before discussing peace and normalization of relations.

For its part, the DPRK has suspended its nuclear and missile tests, destroyed its Punggye-ri nuclear test site, agreed to "permanently dismantle the Dongchang-ri missile engine test site and launch platform under the observation of experts," as well as dismantle its nuclear facilities in Yongbyon if "the United States takes corresponding measures", and returned the remains of fifty-five U.S. servicemen who had died there during the 1950-1953 Korean War. The DPRK wants a formal declaration that the Korean War has ended and the lifting of crippling economic sanctions before completing total and irreversible nuclear disarmament. It seems to me that

normalization of relations and nuclear disarmament must proceed in tandem. And a little good faith disarmament by the United States would certainly help.

Meanwhile, the ROK and DPRK are moving forward with diplomatic initiatives to reestablish peace and reunification on the Korean Peninsula. The two Koreas have withdrawn troops and weapons from some of their front-line guard posts, have halted military exercises on their border, and are clearing land mines in order to search jointly – for the first time - for the remains of Korean War dead. In a beautiful and meaningful gesture, on 11 November the ROK airlifted 200 tons of tangerines from Jeju Island to Pyongyang, in exchange for two tons of pine mushrooms gifted by the ROK following the September North-South Summit.⁸ The ROK had to use military cargo jets rather than commercial airliners to deliver the tangerines in order not to violate U.S. sanctions against the North.

These kinds of developments offer the best hope for peace, normalization of relations and eventual denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. The North-South rapprochement must be vigorously supported by civil society in the ROK, the U.S. and Japan. Yet it is endangered by the U.S. imperial attitude.

Looking back again at modern history, on 15 June 2000, ROK President Kim Dae-jung and DPRK Supreme Leader Kim Jong-il signed a joint North-South Declaration to promote mutual understanding, develop South–North relations and realize peaceful reunification. To this end they declared: “The South and the North have agreed to resolve the question of reunification independently and through the joint efforts of the Korean people, who are the masters of the country”.⁹

According to Yonhap News, the U.S. embassy recently requested that the Chief Executive Officers of six South Korean companies who accompanied President Moon to Pyongyang in August for the third North-South summit submit a report on their visit and inter-Korean economic cooperation.¹⁰

Trump administration hardliners see President Moon’s inter-Korean reconciliation efforts and economic engagement with the DPRK as undermining the U.S. “maximum pressure” campaign of military threats and sanctions, and as disregarding U.S. demands that sanctions be lifted only after complete nuclear disarmament by the DPRK. Last month President Trump told an interviewer, “I haven’t eased the sanctions.” A few days earlier he arrogantly asserted that the ROK wouldn’t lift sanctions on the North without American approval, declaring: “***They do nothing without our approval.***” Even conservative and center-right ROK media who generally support U.S. policy found Trump’s statement “very offensive” and an infringement of “the national sovereignty of South Korea.”¹¹

Following the alarming rise of tensions on the Korean Peninsula, last fall peace, anti-nuclear, and Korean American groups around the U.S. started working together in a loose coalition now called the Korea Peace Network. As I reconstructed our activities I was overwhelmed with the number and pace of developments. I will give only a few brief examples of our activities.

Just about one year ago, on 6 November 2017, on the eve of President Trump's visit to Asia, hundreds of U.S., Japanese and ROK civil society groups issued a joint statement "call[ing] for a diplomatic solution to the dangerous conflict between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea...", and stating: "As those who would be directly impacted by the outbreak of such a conflict, we call on our leaders to take bold steps to ensure lasting peace." The statement demanded that the Trump administration boldly shift to a policy of peace; that the administration of President Moon Jae-in of South Korea honor the spirit of past North-South joint declarations for peace and reconciliation; and that the government of Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe immediately cease all further moves toward military buildup and instead contribute to regional peace.

In November 2017, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for an Olympic Truce, which gained the support of 157 Member States including both Koreas and future hosts of the Olympic Games: Japan, China, France and the United States. The truce period spanned the Winter Olympics and Paralympics, from 2 February – 25 March 2018.

In response, the Korea Peace Network issued an Olympic Truce Call to Action, signed by 135 U.S. organizations, calling on groups and individuals to organize educational events and vigils, collect signatures on a People's Peace Treaty, lobby Congress and organize Olympic watch parties.¹² In the San Francisco Bay Area, we organized a very successful party at a local restaurant, where we watched the Olympic Closing Ceremony and heard from speakers. This event attracted positive local television coverage.

On 28 March, I released an Open Letter to President Trump, President Moon and Chairman Kim at a UN Press Conference. Signed by 110 organizations, it states: "We fully support the upcoming inter-Korean summit in April and the U.S.-DPRK summit in May, and we urge you to patiently and diligently seek common ground.... "Dialogue and diplomacy is essential if we are to prevent a war that would likely result in an unthinkable disaster for the Korean Peninsula, the United States and the world".

And, my favorite part: "Ultimately, the United States must also address a course of denuclearization if the promise of peace is to be realized. If talks are successful, North Korea could in due course rejoin the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).... We also urge the U.S. to honor its NPT commitment, made nearly 50 years ago, to make good faith efforts to pursue nuclear disarmament by seeking negotiations with the other nuclear-armed states to achieve the promise of a world without nuclear weapons.... Your talks hold the promise of moving not only the region, but the entire world closer to realization of that most desirable outcome, in which there would no longer be a need for a menacing U.S. nuclear umbrella relied upon by the ROK and Japan, and a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Northeast Asia would exist in a nuclear weapon-free world."¹³

As I noted at the press conference, this letter took on added significance in light of the appointment of John Bolton as U.S. National Security Advisor. In a 1 March 2018 Wall Street

Journal op-ed Bolton had called for a preemptive military strike on North Korea. The Open Letter is an unambiguous repudiation of Bolton's warmongering, with more than 100 peace, faith-based, professional, and Korean-American organizations across the country welcoming the extraordinary diplomatic opening that has appeared.

In my hat as Mayors for Peace North American Coordinator, I work with our U.S. mayors to introduce resolutions at the annual meetings of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the non-partisan association of cities with populations over 30,000. In June of this year, the U.S. Conference of Mayors unanimously adopted a comprehensive resolution, ***“Calling on the Administration and Congress to Step Back From the Brink and Exercise Global Leadership in Preventing Nuclear War”***. The resolution “welcomes the dramatic diplomatic opening between the U.S. and North Korea and urges President Trump to patiently and diligently work with North and South Korea for a formal resolution of the Korean War and normalized relations with a denuclearized Korean peninsula”.¹⁴

Our newest **Joint Statement of U.S. Civil Society Groups in Support of the Current Peace Process in Korea** is a collaboration between the Korea Peace Network and Korean-American groups. It was drafted in anticipation of a fourth Kim-Moon Summit and a second Trump-Kim Summit. The statement calls on the U.S. government to declare an end to the Korean War; replace the 1953 Armistice with a Peace Treaty; lift sanctions that harm the most vulnerable; and establish normal relations with the DPRK.

In closing, I would like to appreciate and underscore the importance of the Candlelight Revolution. It should serve as an inspiration to civil society movements in the U.S., Japan and around the world.

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyongbu_Line

² <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/asiapcf/east/02/24/skorea.inauguration.reut/index.html>

³ <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/06/654857533/opinion-donald-trump-fell-in-love-with-kim-jong-un>

⁴ <https://www.breitbart.com/video/2018/10/12/bolton-trump-does-not-have-stars-in-his-eyes-when-it-comes-to-north-korea/>

⁵ <https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/nuclear-talks-with-north-korea-may-affect-us-military-posture-dunford-says-1.555375>

⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/us-ambassador-says-north-korea-canceled-pompeo-talks/2018/11/08/29e23ff2-e3b7-11e8-ba30-a7ded04d8fac_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.29fbccbcaac9

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/07/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear-arms.html>

⁸ <https://nationalpost.com/news/world/s-korea-sends-tangerines-to-north-in-return-for-mushrooms>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/June_15th_North-South_Joint_Declaration

¹⁰ <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2018/11/01/0200000000AKR20181101058300003.HTML?sns=fb>

¹¹ <https://www.thenation.com/article/washingtons-ire-shifts-from-kim-jong-un-to-moon-jae-in/>

¹² <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Pk5nquo4zKQM8TU1YYwtO5IS-C3XaKhns6KJX4revgg/edit>

¹³ http://www.abolition2000.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Open-Letter-to-Trump-Moon-and-Kim.final_.docx.pdf

¹⁴ <http://www.wslfweb.org/docs/6-11-18-USCMpressrelease.pdf>