

# North and South Korea: Peaceful Co-Existence Possible?

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## Why North and South Korea cannot co-exist?

North and South Korea on the Korean peninsula have existed since 1948, however, even today each claim to be the sole and only legitimate representative of all Korean people. They both tried to unify the country by military means in 1950 which became an international conflict under the UN forces with the U.S. and China directly intervening until the truce agreement was reached by the three conflicting parties in 1953. However, the key parties, North and South Korea, failed to sign the truce agreement and continue to refuse to recognize each other as separate political entities. Unification of Korea is the ultimate goal of both Koreas, and they keep on living in a state of war. Neither side is willing to accept the other party and tries to harm the other in any way possible. This is the basic problem which must be solved through efforts by all countries involved.

The North Korean nuclear problem is only part of this old and complex problem on the Korean peninsula. The prolonged mutual denial of existence as well as continued efforts to destroy the other Korea is the real threat to peace and stability in Korea which threatens the entire region as well. North Korea is the only country which joined and left the NPT. It claims that it is now outside of the NPT and is pursuing development of nuclear capabilities, openly challenging the non-proliferation regime based on the NPT. The North Korean nuclear issue endangers not only the fragile peace on the Korean peninsula but also of the region. North and South Korea each have different unification strategies at the expense of the other.

## North Korea

North Korea started the Korean War with support of the Soviet leader Stalin and the Chinese leader Mao, but the unexpected U.S. intervention stopped it from achieving the final goal, unification. It still believes that the U.S. and South Korea will invade the country anytime soon. This is the main reason why North Korea believes that it is in constant alert since then and the military is controlling the whole society limiting even the movement of its people.

Since the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1992, it needed to rely only on itself and started to acquire nuclear capabilities. North Korea offered high level political dialogue with South Korea from 1990 to 1992 and desired massive economic aid from the South. However, South Korea refused to extend economic aid to North Korea as it believed that the regime collapse was eminent and any aid to the North would only delay unification on South Korea's terms.

Unlike China and South Korea, the U.S. and North Korea failed to improve their relations in the early 1990s mainly due to the suspicion that North Korea was developing nuclear weapons.

The first nuclear crisis which almost ignited another Korean War started in 1993. After North Korea threatened to withdraw from the NPT, the U.S. and North Korea started direct negotiations in Geneva and reached a peaceful solution through the Geneva Framework Agreement in 1994. The U.S. made some political concessions and promised to build two Light Water Reactors (LWR). North Korea in return agreed to remain in the NPT and to stop all nuclear activities. The U.S. even postponed all U.S.-South Korean military exercises during the negotiations. As a result, North Korea remained as a member of the NPT and the NPT was successfully extended indefinitely in the 1995 NPT Extension Conference.

The promised political recognition by the U.S., however, did not take place and construction of the two LWRs had also made little progress by the end of 1990s. But the situation worsened as a new government under George W. Bush named North Korea as part of an Axis of Evil and nullified the Geneva Framework Agreement in December 2002. North Korea announced on January 10, 2003 that it was compelled to leave the NPT as its national security was threatened by the U.S. and started openly to develop nuclear capabilities. Since then it conducted tests of nuclear devices three times, 2006, 2009 and 2013, despite international outcries and condemnations.

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the leadership firmly believes that it is essential to acquire nuclear capabilities in order to be able to survive. The North Korean leadership is strongly convinced that the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Libya was done mainly because Saddam Hussein and Colonel Qaddafi failed to acquire nuclear capabilities in time. North Korea repeatedly demands that the U.S. stop its hostile policy against North Korea. The political intention of North Korea in developing nuclear capabilities is not only to prevent a potential U.S. invasion, but it desires strongly to unify the country on its own terms, and believes that nuclear weapons are essential in deterring the U.S. intervention.

## South Korea

South Korea also attempted to solve the problem of the divided country by military means with the help of the U.S. and other countries during the Korean War. The UN Security Council resolution in 1950 was only to restore the status quo and to stop the North Korean invasion which was achieved within three months. However, seeing the chance of military victory, South Korea asked the UN forces to march into the North in October 1950 despite of the continued warning from China making the inter-Korean conflict an international war involving China, the U.S. and different nations under the UN mandate.

With heavy losses on both sides and the change of political situation after the death of the Soviet leader Stalin, the armistice agreement was signed by China, North Korea and the U.S. representing the UN forces. However, South Korea refused to sign the truce agreement. As a result, North and South Korea are living in constant threat of war even today and are spending billions of dollars on defense.

South Korea still views that North Korea is illegally occupying its territory as its constitution defines the whole peninsula as South Korean territory. Under such legal framework, it is almost impossible to recognize North Korea as a sovereign state or even accept it as neighbor. South Korea believes that North Korea will invade South Korea again to unify the country under its communism.

The two Korea came closer to each other when South Korea's President Kim Dae Jung addressed numerous peace gestures under its sunshine policy and called for accommodation with the North. The first ever summit between two leaders of the divided nation took place 50 years after the outbreak of the Korean War. The three-day summit in Pyongyang resulted in a "North-South Joint Declaration of June 15, 2000" but without solving the basic problem of non-recognition and termination of the Korean War. Although the two leaders failed to recognize each other as sovereign states and to formally change their unification policies, they declared their intentions for peaceful unification which increased much hopes for peaceful coexistence and free exchanges between the North and South.

As the political environment on the Korean Peninsula improved following the historic North-South Korean summit meeting in June 2000, the U.S. and North Korean relations also seemed to change positively. Special envoy of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, Vice Marshall Jo Myong Rok, visited the U.S. in October 2000 and was received by high ranking officials including President Clinton. A Joint Communique was even issued stating that the U.S. and North Korea formally declared to end their long-standing hostility and to undertake to create a new relationship free from past enmity. They agreed to take steps to radically improve the bilateral relations in favor of consolidating peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region.

It was even considered to convert the 1953 Armistice Agreement into a durable peace mechanism to put an official end to the Korean War. Both sides agreed to preserve the atmosphere helpful to removing distrust, to achieve mutual confidence and to handle issues of primary concern in a constructive manner. Both sides reaffirmed that the relations should be based on the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and non-interference in each other's internal affairs.

Shortly afterward, Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, visited North Korea to prepare for a visit of President Clinton. Clinton, however, mainly due to the election of George W. Bush as a new U.S. President, failed to visit North Korea before leaving office and the nuclear issue remained unresolved and continues to dominate the U.S.-North Korean relations.

South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun tried to improve the situation by having the second summit meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in October 2007. The second inter-Korean Summit took place again in Pyongyang. A peace declaration was signed calling for international talks to replace the Korean War Armistice with a permanent peace treaty. Roh Moo Hyun was succeeded by the conservative government of Lee Myung Bak who had little interest in having better relations with North Korea. After serious naval clashes in the West Coast and shelling of North Koreans to the South Korean island, South Korean government completely banned even limited exchanges of official or private sectors with North Korea under the law "5.24 measure" in 2010.

## Potential Solution

The peaceful co-existence of both Koreas is not only feasible but essential to sustain peace on the Korean Peninsula. When North and South Korea accept each other and postpone the unification issue to the coming generation, they could live together and build peace on the peninsula.

Currently, there is a window of opportunity: The daughter of former South Korean President

Park Chung Hee, Park Geun Hye, was elected as President of South Korea, taking office in February 2013 with a five-year mandate until 25 February 2018. In North Korea, the third grandson of its founder Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Un, has ruled the country since his father Kim Jong Il's death in December 2011. Both Korean leaders share the historic responsibility for meeting their peoples' expectations: To maintain the legacy of their forefathers but also to bring about changes to normalize relations and ultimately to unify the country.

As long as Korea remains divided, neither normal political or economic development on each side is possible. The division not only risks the stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula but also the future of its people. The unification strategies of both Koreas are contradictory and serve only to cement the status quo. Without changing their thinking and strategy, it is impossible to find a lasting peace mechanism to replace the truce agreement. A new thinking is needed.

North Korea believes that it is still at war with the U.S. and therefore, the nuclear option must be maintained until the final goal is achieved. North Korea has been and still is seeking far-reaching rapprochement as well as recognition by the U.S. as it is eager to end the prolonged confrontation with the U.S. Its economy has been battered already in the 1990s and it needs to reconstruct the country. The young leader is well aware that he can only survive and develop his country if he can accommodate with the U.S. Therefore, further isolation and economic punishment of North Korea will only worsen the situation. Instead, North Korea should be more engaged in the international community and eventually be integrated into a new East Asian security and economic structure.

It is urgent now to resolve the issue through bold diplomatic approaches in order to break the current impasse. Instead of blaming each other for breaching the agreement first, the U.S. and North Korea should commit themselves to fully implement the agreements. If the U.S. refuses to resume dialog and only pressures North Korea to dismantle its nuclear program without providing security guarantees, it is very likely that North Korea will further speed up its nuclear program as it has left the NPT already and will proceed with its nuclear as well as missile testing just to show that it is determined to deter the nuclear threat. It might even resume exporting sensitive technology and missiles to other countries in order to earn hard currency and to be taken seriously by the U.S.

Past attempts to change the situation failed mainly due to mutual distrust and animosity. Nevertheless, as long as the status of war between the U.S. and North Korea remains, North Korea will not give up its nuclear option. It is unlikely that North Korea will give in to the U.S. pressure and sanctions. Therefore, terminating the war and eliminating the danger of war on the Korean peninsula is the key to peaceful and lasting solutions to the danger of proliferation in the region.

Continuing confrontation and denying the existence of North Korea alone cannot solve the problem; rather it worsens the situation. The top priority of the two Korean leaders should be to end the war and peacefully restore the Korean nation by healing of the past. To achieve these goals, President Park Geun Hye must show greater flexibility in dealing with North Korea. Negotiations imply that each side is willing to exchange something it has for something it wants, to achieve higher interests. In this regard, mutually agreed confidence and trust-building measures are essential.

Waiting for the collapse of one Korea is only a waste of invaluable time, while possibly losing the historic opportunity to change the situation. As the two Germany did in the early 1970s, the two Korea should agree on a basic treaty recognizing each other first and working together in order to build sustainable peace in Korea. This will be the first step in preventing another inter-Korean military conflict which could destroy the legacies of the two leader's ancestors.

The North Korean leadership wrongly believes that without the U.S. intervention in Korean affairs, North Korea would have won the war of national liberation and achieved unification in their favor long ago. This is the main reason why North Korea continues to insist on making a deal with the U.S. to solve the nuclear issue. North Korea has already demonstrated its nuclear capabilities on three occasions, and it believes that the U.S. should now withdraw from the Korean Peninsula and let Koreans decide on their future. President Park Geun Hye must persuade Kim Jong Un that without giving up its nuclear weapons program, it is impossible to improve relations with the U.S. For this to succeed, security guarantees for North Korea to replace its "nuclear deterrent" will likely be necessary.

President Park Geun Hye can offer North Korea mutual acceptance and thus end the Korean War while delaying the unification issue to the next generation. As the two Korean states did not even sign the truce agreement in 1953, they need to declare end of the war and sign a non-aggression treaty. The foundation was already laid in 1991 during the prime ministerial meetings, and now both parties must build on this foundation and sign a basic treaty, recognizing each other as sovereign states and exchanging representatives to each capital in order to establish official relations. This is the only way to build trust, which President Park Geun Hye desires and which would bring about positive changes on the Korean Peninsula.

Once relations are normalized and clearly defined, enabling the two Korea to peacefully coexist, they should then reduce the size of their respective military, so that no side can be a threat to the other. Military down scaling will free up expenditure that could be used to develop their respective countries. If there is no more threat to North Korea, Pyongyang would have no reason to possess nuclear capabilities, it has stated this on numerous occasions. And vice versa, if North Korea is no longer a threat to South Korea, Seoul would have no reason to spend vast amounts of money on purchasing new and modern weapons. The two leaders should work to improve political circumstances first, so that the Korean Peninsula will no longer be a crisis region and the two Korea can work together to build a single nation again.

The two Korean leaders are well aware and realize that there is an emerging danger encroaching on the Korean Peninsula and that they should do everything to prevent Korea from becoming a victim of the power rivalry between China, Japan, Russia, and the U.S. again as in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The two Korea have no other alternative but to work together to prevent future confrontations and potential conflicts between the big powers on the Korean Peninsula.

A new process needs to get underway until the Korean leaders reach a solution. However, since many people in both countries are still strongly against any contact with the other Korea, this has to be done quietly without much media or public attention. The most important step, however, should be the termination of hostile relations by declaring that the Korean War as officially ended by the two Koreas. The war-like situation on the Korean Peninsula hinders development of normal relations with each other and prolongs a most inhumane situation for the Korean people.

The two leaders of Korea should agree on a new relationship by accepting each other and by beginning to build mutual trust which could lead to a peace process. This will certainly not be an easy matter as the two Korea have their own dynamics as their systems have been established upon a 70-year-old division and antagonism. However, reconciliation and acceptance of each other will definitely help to build a more peaceful world and are essential in realizing a nuclear-weapons-free Korean Peninsula.

In the final analysis, the Six-Party Talks is the essential instrument to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, therefore, it should be resumed as soon as possible without any precondition. Nevertheless, North and South Korea must first decide to work together to accept peaceful co-existence instead of wasting energy to become the sole winner of an old ideological competition. Today, both Koreas can be winners by working together to prevent any military conflict on the Korean peninsula. This is the challenge and historical obligation of the two Korean leaders in this difficult time.