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Despite U.S., peace process continues in Korea



U.S. bases in south Korea

Over the past several months the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or north Korea) and the Republic of Korea (ROK or south Korea) have taken historic, concrete steps toward peace and reunification — from removing landmines and guard towers in the Demilitarized Zone to reconnecting roads and railroads between the two countries.

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In October, after several meetings over the summer between the leaders of the north and south, DPRK's Ri Son Gwon, chair of the Committee for Peaceful Reunification, met with south Korea's Unification Minister Cho Myung-gyon and signed a memorandum of understanding to reconnect roads and rails. China's influential Global Times newspaper also endorsed the memorandum and together with Russia has called for easing sanctions as the DPRK continues to engage in goodwill measures aimed at peace and reunification. (eurasiafuture.com)

The U.S. government, however, opposes easing sanctions, instead arguing that the DPRK must immediately meet all its demands first, with nothing reciprocated by the U.S. It even opposes the ROK's efforts to reconnect roads and rails. On Oct. 10 Trump said, "They won't do it without our approval. They do nothing without our approval."

Meanwhile, construction continues on the expansion of Camp Humphreys, 40 miles south of Seoul, which when completed in 2020 will become the largest U.S. overseas base in the world.

Process began almost five decades ago

Despite U.S. interference and its domineering, unilateral positions, the recent rapprochement between north and south possibly represents the most significant development between the divided states since the 1953 Armistice that officially ended hostilities but not the war. After being divided by the U.S. military in 1945, with zero consultation from the Korean people themselves, Korea's peace and reunification process has been long and halting with years of no progress — especially during the many years the south was ruled by brutal military dictatorships backed by Washington.

While the Trump administration is quick to take credit for the recent progress, the actual events that led to this point began long before Trump took power and were in spite of the U.S., not because of it.

In 1971 DPRK President Kim Il Sung proposed opening a dialogue between the north and south for the first time since the war began. In 1972 Pyongyang received a high-level delegation from Seoul, leading to a joint statement based on Kim Il Sung's three principles of reunification: "The three principles of realizing independent reunification without outside interference, achieving great national unity by transcending differences in ideas, ideals and systems, and reunifying the divided land by peaceful means without recourse to armed force, are the starting point of and the basis for the solution of our reunification question." (korea-dpr.com)

In 1974 the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK proposed a formal end to the war with the U.S., recognizing it as a crucial step toward ending hostilities and achieving peace and reunification. But the U.S. ignored it. Then in 1980 President Kim Il Sung proposed the creation of a reunified Korean nation, the Democratic Confederal Republic of Koryo, which would have kept the differing social systems in the north and south in place, while creating a common confederal government, with each side taking an equal part.

The DPRK has maintained a continuous position of dialogue and diplomacy with both Washington and Seoul, seeking to peacefully end the horrendous conflict that has divided the Korean people for over 70 years. Progress was made again in 1994 with the signing of the "Agreed Framework" between the DPRK and the U.S., but the U.S. Congress failed to meet its end of the deal. That would have included the U.S. helping the DPRK develop peaceful nuclear technology for electricity generation, lifting sanctions and normalizing diplomatic ties between the countries. In exchange the DPRK would dismantle its uranium enrichment capability, which it began to do.

But by 1999, with funding for the Agreed Framework tied up in a Congress hostile to the whole policy, the U.S. has still not lifted sanctions, normalized relations or provided a civilian nuclear power reactor. The DPRK warned it would resume uranium enrichment as a result.

After the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the NATO overthrow of the Libyan government in 2011, it became ever clearer that only the strongest of weapons could offer an effective deterrent to imperialist destruction. Even a small nuclear arsenal could be enough to make imperialist powers seriously reconsider an attack. Iraq and Libya both tried to work with the West, allowing outside inspectors to come in and verify the end of their weapons programs. Yet they were eventually betrayed, facing the full force of NATO's immense firepower, resulting in over a million deaths in Iraq alone and the return of the open slave trade in Libya.

The DPRK knows all too well what that firepower can do. During the Korean War, about a quarter of the population was wiped out. Virtually every city in the north was reduced to ashes. Once all the urban targets had been hit, U.S. planes began bombing farmland and crops to deliberately starve the survivors, a genocidal act.

Unlike Iraq and Libya, the DPRK has successfully built a small nuclear deterrent. While just a fraction of the size of the U.S. arsenal, it is still enough to make the U.S. think twice about making an attack. Even a "surgical" strike to take out a single target — like what

Israel did to Iraq in 1981, when it bombed a French-built civilian research reactor that was unsuitable for making bombs — could trigger a devastating response.

U.S. brought nukes to Korea

It wasn't the DPRK that introduced the first nuclear weapons to the Korean peninsula. The U.S. stationed nuclear missiles in the south decades ago, even as its nuclear-armed submarines and aircraft carriers prowl the surrounding waters. The Pentagon's long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles can deliver thousands of nuclear strikes from the U.S. mainland to every part of the world in minutes. It continues to introduce more conventional weapons to Korea as well, such as the THAAD missile system, which was met with widespread protests in south Korea and around the world in recent years.

Once the DPRK achieved a functional nuclear arsenal — no small feat for a country roughly the size of Mississippi that is under heavy sanctions and constant interference from the main global superpower — Washington's threats of a military solution to the conflict were greatly complicated, especially when the Korean People's Army also developed missiles able to directly strike the U.S. mainland.

Increased sanctions by the U.S. and its allies could only do so much, as the country had already been under massive sanctions for decades and successfully learned how to become self-sufficient in many areas as a result.

Despite the new sanctions, multiple new construction projects have been completed all over the country — from glimmering hi-rise districts in Pyongyang to new housing, schools and recreation facilities in smaller cities and towns. In Wonsan, on the country's east coast, a new airport and coastal resort area with dozens of hotels and entertainment facilities are rapidly nearing completion. (exploredprk.com)

The position held by the DPRK for decades — of inter-Korean dialogue free from outside interference as the way to achieve peaceful reunification — became the only clearly viable option. Sanctions became less effective due to the DPRK's self-reliance, and outright war became far more costly for the U.S., now facing the possibility of a nuclear exchange with the DPRK for the first time.

With the removal of corrupt, hawkish south Korean President Park Geun-hye, daughter of dictator Park Chung-hee, and the election of the reformist-minded Moon Jae-in in south Korea, the south is newly able to engage in the peaceful dialogue that the DPRK has long sought.

In his 2018 New Year's address, Kim Jong Un expressed his desire for open dialogue with the new south Korean president just seven months after his election. Since then, the roots

of a new era in relations between north and south have been planted, with prospects for peace and reunification brighter than they've been in decades.

Yet the U.S. has shown it will stand in the way if the process goes too far. With Democrats criticizing Trump for being "soft" on north Korea, they may use their new control of the House to block any more progress to spite Trump, much as Congressional Republicans did to Bill Clinton with the Agreed Framework over 20 years ago.

If a Democrat wins the presidency in 2020, the politician cannot be relied upon to be any more open to peaceful, constructive dialogue than Trump has been. Both parties are for war and imperialism.

The Korean people themselves must navigate this juncture, free from U.S. interference. The U.S. should stop construction of Camp Humphreys and remove all military personnel and equipment from the region. It should finally conclude a peace treaty with the DPRK to replace the 1953 Armistice. And it should engage in an open, fair and diplomatic relationship with Korea as a whole by establishing full diplomatic ties, instead of acting unilaterally as it has for decades, with little progress to show for it.