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# Landmines: The Never-Ending War



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## Recommended Citation

Olly Terry & Yang Subin, "Landmines: The Never-Ending War", NAPSNet Policy Forum, November 10, 2015, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/landmines-the-never-ending-war/>

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by Olly Terry & Yang Subin of Seoul based NGO *Peace Network*

November 10, 2015

This essay was first published by [Peace Network](#) on October 22, 2015.

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# I. Introduction

The recent landmine explosion on August 4th, that maimed two young South Korean soldiers, served as a stark reminder that the Korean War hasn't formally ended. Landmines remain a prominent symbol of the lack of a peace treaty as the DMZ, that divides the Korean peninsula, remains one of the most heavily mined areas in the world. This essay implores the two Koreas and the US to unconditionally join the Ottawa Treaty, and for the South Korean government to establish a proper support system for civilian landmine victims.

Subin Yang recently received her B.A in International Studies with concentration in Asian Studies from Ewha Womans University, Seoul. She is currently an intern at Seoul based NGO *Peace Network*. Her interests are the interaction of women and militarism in East Asia.

Olly Terry is a research associate at *Peace Network* and has a Masters degree in International Politics and Human Rights from City University, London. His main research interests include North-South Korean relations, the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and North Korean defectors' human rights.

## II. Essay by Olly Terry and Yang Subin

### Introduction

Last August 4th, two South Korean soldiers were injured in a landmine explosion during their patrol in the DMZ area. This almost led to a wartime situation between the two Koreas. There is still some controversy as to whether the incident was a deliberate attack, an accident, an example of brinkmanship by North Korea, or just an unfortunate accident caused by a misplaced/lost North Korean landmine. While it is unclear whether we can interpret the word "regret" (Feffer, J., 2015) from North Korea over the incident as an apology, the Panmunjom agreement on August 25<sup>th</sup> between the two Koreas was nonetheless concluded with satisfactory results; the de-escalation of tensions and the promise of inter-Korean family reunions and the like. However, the two soldiers' wounds from the landmine incident will remain forever in their minds and bodies, while also causing suffering for their loved ones.

The international society has recognized the cruelty and brutality of landmines and has made efforts to ban landmines and similarly inhumane weapons. Concerted efforts from NGOs, activists, and governments led to the Ottawa Treaty in 1997, which banned burying landmines and called for demining. The realization of the signing of the Ottawa Treaty was a long struggle that started with an international campaign by the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1970s to ban landmines. This eventually led to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, which struggled to attract participants. That is until in the 1990s a combination of the work of Jody Williams, a renowned anti-landmines NGO activist, brought the issue under the international spotlight, and Canada's minister of foreign affairs, Lloyd Axworthy, secured support from other middle power states paved the way to the form the Ottawa Treaty. So far 162 countries have become parties to the treaty. However, North Korea, ROK (South Korea), and the US haven't joined the treaty due to the "unique circumstances on the Korean Peninsula" (Hayden, C., 2015 cited in Schwartz, F., 2015). This essay will describe the current situation of landmines on the Korean peninsula, explain the fate of civilian victims, introduce the Ottawa Treaty, and give reasons why the two Koreas and the US should join the Ottawa Treaty.

## **Landmines and Their Victims in South Korea**

One of the most serious problems regarding landmines on the Korean peninsula is that there are estimated to be more than a million landmines buried in the 661,157 square meters of the DMZ of Korea, making it the most heavily-mined place in the world. In other words, there are “2.3 landmines for every square meter along” (Yoo, K. 2015) the width of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and surrounding area that divides the two Koreas. However, the exact whereabouts and precise number of landmines are not known. According to *Peace Sharing*, a South Korean branch of the International Campaign for Banning Landmines, a lot of the landmines near the DMZ and Civil Control Line area were deployed in 1960s after the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and the January 21 incident of 1968 (also known as The Blue House Raid), when North Korean assassins attempted to kill President Park Jung-hee. At the time, the documentation of the positioning of these mines was not as comprehensive as it needed to be. Exacerbating the lack of proper documentation is the fact that in the half century since these mines were placed, many have since moved due to heavy rain. Furthermore, most of these landmines buried around this time were M-14s, an inter personnel landmine invented in the US in 1955. As it is made of plastic, it cannot be detected by metal detectors, making it hard to eradicate. This only exacerbates the already serious problem of poorly or undocumented landmine placement in and around the DMZ.

Sadly, a result of this poor documentation of the positioning of mines means that soldiers serving around the DMZ, such those injured in the August 4th incident, are not the only ones to fall victim to landmines. There have been many civilian landmine victims in the residential areas close to the DMZ such as Cherwon, Paju, Yeoncheon and Yanggu who were injured by landmines buried during and after the Korean War. Often the landmine accidents that occurred in these areas were caused by lost mines or mines that shifted due to heavy rainfall. These civilians were injured while taking a walk, cultivating their land, farming or building schools or houses for their village. Many of them died or lost their arms, their feet, a whole leg, both legs, eyes and so on, leading to lifetime or generational poverty. The aforementioned South Korean NGO *Peace Sharing* estimated that there have been “462 civilian victims as of this March, of which 158 were killed and 304 were injured” (*Peace Sharing* 2015, cited in *Yonhap News*, 2015). However, most of the victims haven't received any attention from the public or compensation or support from the government. Additionally, the South Korean government has never done an official survey on civilian landmine victims.

## **Why the US Shouldn't Make an Exception on the Korean Peninsula**

The damage that landmines can do is not lost on US President Barack Obama. In September of last year, he announced that the US would mostly comply with the Ottawa Treaty. This commitment means that the US will not use, produce or transfer anti-personnel mines to other states, must destroy their stockpiles and clear any mined areas in their territory within a decade. Additionally, the US has firmly made a distinction between so-called ‘smart’ mines; mines that destruct or deactivate automatically, and ‘dumb’ mines that last indefinitely. The former are allowed, while the latter are most certainly not. All this is far more progressive than Obama's predecessors, Bush and Clinton, who both decided not to join the Ottawa Treaty. However, the flip side is that none of Obama's new commitments to the Ottawa Treaty will be applied to the Korean peninsula.

So, why does the US consider the situation on the Korean peninsula worthy of exception from its adherence to its Ottawa Treaty commitments? In short, the US has long since held the belief that landmines are a crucial part of defending South Korea from an attack or attempted invasion from North Korea. Moreover, landmines are easy and relatively cheap to produce, in comparison to other military weapons. In 2009, the then US State Department spokesman, Ian Kelly, said of the Ottawa Treaty; “We determined that we would not be able to meet our national defense needs nor our security commitments to our friends and allies if we sign this convention” (Kelly, I., 2009 cited in

Williams, J., 2009). Fast forward to present day and it is clear the Obama administration maintains the same view. So, is the US right in its conviction that landmines are a key part of its ally South Korea's national defense? We believe the answer is clearly a firm 'no' for two main reasons.

### **Why the US and the Two Koreas Should Join the Ottawa Treaty**

First and foremost, landmines are a completely redundant and antiquated piece of military hardware. The threat they deter or defend against, an invasion from North Korea, simply doesn't exist. The current threat from North Korea that the US-ROK needs to concern itself with comes from nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Therefore, as a piece of security hardware, landmines are less than a pawn when it comes to national security. A defensive line of strategically placed smart mines are seen as being useful in slowing down or halting advancing enemy forces, but this scenario is simply unimaginable on the Korean peninsula.

Secondly, we believe that rather than allowing the development of 'smart' landmines to develop into yet another arms race front to face off with North Korea with, the US-ROK have a far more progressive and potentially rewarding solution at their disposal. Doing away with all types of landmines from top to bottom on the Korean peninsula, both in terms of ending deployment, and demining/destroying stockpiles, can act as a small first step towards working together with North Korea to repair relations. As described above, the events of August 4th only serve to harm inter-Korean relations. If the August 4th incident was a deliberate attack to raise tensions, and was an act of brinkmanship by the North to force talks, then taking away landmines as an option will help protect civilians and soldiers stationed near the DMZ (who are often lowly ranked or conscripted soldiers). In the past Pyongyang has used rocket launches and nuclear tests as part of the same tactic.

While this is problematic in its own right and the removal of landmines as an option doesn't remove this threat, it does at least avoid unfortunate soldiers and civilians becoming the victims of landmines, as is so often the case. Furthermore, the US' decision to cast North Korea/the Korean peninsula as an exception and an anomaly continues a trend of singling North Korea out and treating it differently. Setting North Korea apart from the rest and effectively labeling it as the only country the US deems necessary to defend against with landmines can only push North Korea further into its shell and deeper into international isolation, making the task of developing ties with North Korea and bringing it back into the international fold even harder.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we believe that by formally signing up, unconditionally, to the Ottawa Treaty, the US, South Korea and North Korea can protect their own soldiers and citizens and take a step towards working together towards building better relations. The destruction of stockpiles and demining could even be done as a joint-project between the three nations. In any case, comprehensively wiping out mine stockpiles, demining and pledging to remove the exception of the Korean peninsula in the US' Ottawa Treaty obligations will surely be a good start in building trust with North Korea and would send a message to Pyongyang that Washington and Seoul are willing to work together with them. The US is often accused of avoiding responsibility for the dauntingly massive task (and cost) of demining Korea, and similarly of passing the buck of responsibility of the ownership of the mines to South Korea. Well known anti-landmine activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Jody Williams has often labored the point that the US-ROK command chain means that the mines do actually belong to South Korea "and therefore would be unaffected by Obama's joining the Mine Ban Treaty" (Williams, J., 2009). The US can put all these criticisms and arguments to bed by applying their Ottawa Treaty commitments to the Korean peninsula too. The US's overall contribution to demining across the world is excellent, it has donated more than any nation towards demining,

quoted in some sources as being more than “\$2.3 billion dollars for efforts in 90 countries” (*The White House*, 2014). The US can continue its good work and use its unrivaled position as the world’s number one power to lead this process and set an example to the rest of the world, including North Korea. As for South Korea, it’s clear that those civilians who have already fallen victim to landmines need to be given the financial and medical support and compensation they need.

We hope that the US, North Korea and South Korea will work together in ridding this peninsula of landmines completely to protect its citizens and work together towards better relations.

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Nautilus Institute  
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:  
[nautilus@nautilus.org](mailto:nautilus@nautilus.org)