

# Nautilus Institute PFO 00-02: Engaging North Korea

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# Nautilus Institute PFO 00-02: Engaging North Korea

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## Response to Indong Oh and Joel Wit

By Kim Myong Chol, Center for Korean-American Friendship

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### CONTENTS

#### [I. Introduction](#)

#### [II. Discussion](#)

- [1. Comment on Indong Oh's Article](#)
- [2. Comment on Joel Wit's Essay](#)

### [3. Response by Indong Oh](#)

## [III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses](#)

[Go to essay by Indong Oh](#)

## **March 2, 2000**

[Go to essay by Joel Wit](#)

## **March 1, 2000**

### **I. Introduction**

The following comments to the essays "Make South Korea the Real Party to North Korea," by Indong Oh (Policy Forum Online 00-02B) and "Clinton and North Korea: Past, Present, and Future," by Joel Wit. The comments were written by Kim Myong Chol, Executive Director of the Center for Korean-American Peace, Tokyo. A response by Oh follows.

### **II. Discussion**

## **1. Comment on Indong Oh's Article**

Whatever his motive is, an encouraging thing about Dr. Indong Oh's article is his clear-cut statement that South Korea is in the status of a vassal state of the United States. The problem with his article is his failure to demand the reunification of Korea in an independent way. Expectedly, he does not describe how the Americans came to seize operational control over the South Korean forces, nor does he correctly characterize the Korean question.

Oh demands that the Americans should relinquish their operational control over the South Korean forces to enable South Korea to "become a fully autonomous and legitimate real party to N. Korea". To support his demand, he cites three points.

The first is that North Korea regards South Korea as a puppet of the United States. The second is that South Korea is superior to North Korea in terms of population, economic capability, and military potential. The third is that there is no need for the United States to be hostage of the North South Korean tensions.

He says that the continuing American control over the South Korean military casts South Korea in the role of a puppet in the eyes of the North Koreans. This is not the case, however.

The North Korean perception is that its indisputable puppet status induced Seoul to put its armed forces under American control, never vice versa.

Many people refer to the July 15, 1950 event which authorized the transfer of operational control of the South Korean armed forces to General MacArthur. It is described as the Taejon Agreement, but it was nothing but a letter from Syngman Rhee to the American general, offering to place all the South Korean armed forces under his command. This letter completed the American seizure of

operational control over the South Korean military.

Two years earlier, on August 26, 1948, 11 days after its installation, the ROK went out of its way to behave in a way totally characteristic of a vassal state. It renounced its otherwise inalienable control over most of its armed forces under a temporary military treaty: the coast guards and the army. On December 1, 1987 the Americans returned peacetime control to the South Koreans. Military control matters in a wartime situation. Peacetime control is totally illusory and deceiving.

In the opinion of Kim Jong Il, since it is the way of a puppet to be manipulated by the puppeteer, it never occurs to the puppet to act in a way he pleases. Nor does it occur to the puppeteer to leave the puppet to act on its own accord. Otherwise, he would think of throwing it away when it becomes useless. Once kept for three days by a master, the dog never thinks of leaving him. So it is far from puzzling that "South Korea has not come forward openly to the U.S. to reclaim its sovereign right so that it can become the de facto counterpart to the North on military issues."

The background behind the birth of the ROK and its domestic and policy behavior till today testify to its puppet status beyond question, a matter of common knowledge in South Korea and abroad. Very few dare to call it a client state, however, firstly because its master is the USA and secondly because of the National Security Law and its enforcement organization (first called KCIA, renamed Agency for National Security Planning, and now National Intelligence Service).

There is no denying that the ROK government ought not to have come into being as it meant renewal of darkest Japanese colonial rule on South Korean soil. To all intents and purposes, it is the offspring of Japanese colonial rule and American military policy, without any Korean legitimacy.

According to Kim Jong Il, the ROK has the following revealing common denominators with the defunct Manchukuo Government:

First: Puppet status and lack of legitimacy. Manchukuo was a puppet created by Japan, while the ROK was installed by the USA. Like the former, the latter has no Korean legitimacy as it was formed with collaborators with the Japanese colonialists and traitors to the nation.

Second: Foreign garrison commander. The actual ruler of Manchukuo was practically ruled by the commander of the Kwangtung Army, who also doubled as Japanese Ambassador and Secretary of Kwangtung Affairs. The Commander of the American Forces in Korea doubles as Commander of the UN Command and Commander of the US-ROK Combined Forces Command.

Third: Roots in the Kwangtung Army. A typical case in point was General Park Chung Hee. He was trained in the Manchurian Military school and the Japanese Military Academy. He took part in the punitive operations against the Korean patriots who organized the anti-Japanese armed struggle.

Westpoint-trained Colonel William Maglin is quoted by Mark Gayn in his famous Japan Diary: "Many people question the wisdom of keeping men trained by the Japanese. But many men are born policemen. We felt that if they did a good job for the Japanese, they would do a good job for us. It would be unfair to drive men trained by the Japanese out of the force."

The Americans established themselves as the sworn enemy of the Korean people. Japan Diary quoted an unnamed American official as confessing: "From the first day, we've behaved as enemies of the Korean people."

South Korea has had as many as five such blood-stained, infamous presidents in succession in a matter of half a century after its foundation.

Syngman Rhee, toppled in a student uprising, was airlifted into Hawaii, where he died a dog's death. Ignore two temporary presidents, Yun Po Sun and Choi Gyu Ha. Park Chung Hee was shot to death by his chief bodyguard in the presence of mistresses in a secret house.

Chun Doo Hwan was a death-row inmate. Roh Tae Woo was behind iron bars, sentenced to life imprisonment. The two are now free, released in an amnesty. Kim Yong Sam was deeply implicated in a series of scandals, with his second son sentenced to a prison term. According to one opinion poll of South Korean grade schoolers, the most unwanted career is President.

Oh cites three figures to drive his point: (1) South Korea's population is twice that of North Korea; (2) South Korea's GDP is 20 times larger than that of North Korea; (3) Seoul's military budget is three times the North Korean figure. I understand these figures are clearly correct.

True, the South Korean dogs are fat, have air-conditioned kennels, are probably clad in golden silk, but their mentality remains that of a dog. I agree that the North Korean wolves are hungry, dressed in rags, and live in poor shelter but their spirit is sky-high and silken.

A stark reality is that the dog is a dog is a dog, however fat it may be, however fashionable its clothes may be. The dog cannot expect to become a master and behave freely. Its only freedom is to follow the whims of the American master.

Economic prosperity does not count much in political and military affairs. To be economically better off and have a better-equipped army is one thing and to win actual political and military war is another altogether.

The South Korean monthly magazine editor Cho Kap Je once remarked: "A certain commander in the American forces in Korea confessed that if the ROK troops engage the North Korean army one hundred times, they will lose every battle." An unnamed top ranking official in the Pentagon told me that he could not understand why the South Korean forces were so weak with all their superior equipment.

North Korea and North Vietnam are no match to the United States in terms of population, technology, GDP, and military capability. But they triumphed in the Korean War and the Vietnam War respectively. North Korea manages to keep engaging the Americans, the Japanese and the West Europeans not because of its economic strength but because of its political and military resilience based on Korean legitimacy.

World history knows many other cases of small but well trained, highly motivated armies defeating better armed larger armies and taking over the huge economic resources of the defeated larger countries. A prime example is the Mongols who, without any significant economic capability, swept over most of the Asian and European continents and imposed their own political will on China, where they established a Mongol empire. It is also true of the Manchus, who had never formed a state in Northeastern China but invaded China and ruled China for a couple of centuries.

Oh insists that the Americans do not need to be the hostage of the North-South Korean tensions.

His argument betrays his little knowledge of the cause and effect of the Korean question. The cause is the American division of Korea and the American military presence in South Korea. The effect is the North- South Korean hostilities, which have been provoked, stoked, fanned and played up by the Americans.

As Kim Jong Il put it, the Korean question can be properly defined as settling the Korean people's centuries-old moral scores with the foreign forces, among others the Americans and the Japanese. It

is also the matter of military and political issues with them and putting an end to the American military presence in South Korea. In short, it involves ending the division of the country for its reunification.

In the view of Kim Jong Il, the fundamental contradiction or hostility in Korea is not one between Pyongyang and Seoul but that between Pyongyang and Washington, the national contradiction between the United States and the Korean people.

Then the key question is whether the Americans will ever relinquish their military control over South Korea and if so, when South Korea will become independent and sovereign in the true word of the term.

The right answer is in the hands of Kim Jong Il. Only when his government signs a peace treaty with the American government, the Americans will forfeit whatever reason they have to keep GI's in South Korea and retain their operational control over the South Korean forces. By 2003, the American government will be driven into a catch-22 situation. An American way out will be available only through negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington.

At long last, Kim Jong Il has come within striking distance of having the Korean question resolved in a negotiated manner on the strength of the nuclear and military bargaining chips he has acquired at the expense of the national economy and the livelihoods of the population. The defense buildup efforts have proved no lost labor in the final analysis.

Practically everybody in Washington would prefer to keep mum about the year 2003, by which time the Americans are duty bound to complete the light water reactor project. Failure to meet the deadline even by a minute -- the American are certain to be nearly ten years behind schedule -- would induce North Korea to throw away the October 21, 1994 agreed framework and resume nuclear projects, civilian and military. The North Koreans would never make any compromise on the target year.

By that year the Americans will have to make final but critical decisions. They have less than three years to go before then. Time is running out.

Option One is to unleash a preemptive strike on North Korea in a bid to knock out its nuclear facilities or totally destroy it. There would no legitimate cause to justify American military action. It would be rather Kim Jong Il that would be justified in ordering massive retaliation against the American mainland.

Option Two is to let Pyongyang go nuclear with an operational ICBM fleet at its disposal.

The most likely outcome would an irresistible invitation to Japan to arm itself with nuclear-arms. The Americans would have great difficulties dissuading Tokyo from acquiring nuclear arms as Japan would feel increasingly leery of an America that has failed to stop North Korea from developing nuclear arms. With its nuclear force, Japan would be less hospitable to the American military presence. Eventually the United States would be forced to disengage from Japan to fall back on its island strategy, based on Guam and Hawaii.

Option Three is to express a sincere apology for the delay in the KEDO project and offer a package of attractive political and economic compensation. The package must comprise downright removal of the DPRK from the list of terrorism sponsors accompanied by immediate establishment of embassies in Pyongyang and Washington, and simultaneous conclusion of a peace treaty which promises a withdrawal of American troops from South Korea in five years.

The DPRK would find itself a de facto nuclear power like Israel, possessed of not less than dozens of portable nuclear devices to be delivered onto strategic targets on American soil by ICBMs. Already the DPRK is the fourth ICBM power after the USA, Russia and China.

The first two would be nightmarish to the American policy planners. The last option would be the only wise course of action for them to follow.

Thanks to Kim Jong Il's diplomatic and military initiative, South Korea would be liberated from its miserable vassal status with the American forces phased out pursuant to a peace agreement between North Korea and the USA. A new democratic coalition government installed in Seoul would be able to become independent and reassert operational control over the South Korean armed forces.

## **2. Comment on Joel Wit's Essay**

Most significantly missing in Joel Wit's article is any mention of the fateful year of 2003 by which the Americans will have to work against the clock. Once 2003 strikes, the North Koreans would never forgo their undeclared nuclear status nor would they abandon their ICBMs, whether Tokyo decides to go nuclear.

Joel Wit, while calling the nuclear agreement "a good deal for the United States," tries to attribute its slow implementation to mundane episodes. The North Koreans never dismiss practical non-implementation of the agreement "mundane" but perceive it "a most flagrant breach" which is unpardonable in every respect.

The reality is that the Americans have done little to be as good as their word and most likely will default on the Geneva agreement by 2003, despite the fact that the North Koreans have kept their nuclear project frozen at Yongbyon.

The year 2003 will come before the Americans are aware. The North Koreans will stand on guard, vigilantly watching every move of the Americans, how they will meet their deadline for completion of the KEDO project.

Let us wait and see what will happen.

## **3. Response by Indong Oh**

Let's Not Re-fight the Korean War; Response to Kim Myong Chol's Discussion

By Indong Oh, Korea-2000, Los Angeles

It is quite stimulating when an article generates a large number of responses, particularly when the comments are challenging to the article. Bradley Martin posted a separate essay, "The What-If Question" in response to articles by me, Hwal-Woong Lee of the Korea-2000 in Los Angeles, and Tim Savage of the Nautilus Institute. Kim Myong Chol also wrote his comments on our respective articles at length. I submitted my response to Mr. Martin's essay and I appreciate Mr. Kim's comments and arguments on my essay.

However, I should point out that my motive was not to illuminate who is the more legitimate or more puppet between the North and South Korean governments and how they became such. Nor was I

demanding the reunification of Korea, because I consider it a matter for the two Koreas to settle themselves in principle, independently, and not by the U.S. Rather, it was to highlight, as an American observer of the U.S. policy, the question of what the U.S. needs to do to end the state of war and secure peace in the Korean peninsula.

Most of Mr. Kim's comments on my article do not really directly address the points I was making. Nonetheless, many of his allusions to historical events, analyzed in his own unique way, provide different views to less informed readers on recent Korean history. In the almost total absence of articles from North Korean scholars in the international forum, his previous articles certainly give a unique perspective on North Korea, and he has rehashed them here.

After all, North and South Korea have recognized each other's existence since the historic North-South Joint Statement of July 4, 1972, which confirmed the principle of independent and peaceful unification through grand national unity over and above differences in ideology and system of the two halves of Korea. Also, they were recognized internationally when they were separately admitted to the UN simultaneously in 1991. Furthermore, both sides signed and effectuated, although they did not implement, the well thought out 1992 Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, Exchanges, and Cooperation.

Further argument on the legitimacy matter, a byproduct of the division of Korea that has deepened over the years, will not be productive and in fact will even be self-contradictory to the North Korean proposed formula for creating a "Democratic Confederal Republic of Koryo." I trust North Korea would not like to form a confederation with a puppet. While it seems Mr. Kim often develops his view based on the opinion of North Korean leaders, the statements or actions of the North Korean authorities in fact differ from his view.

By the way, I agree with Mr. Kim that the so-called "peacetime operational control" is a game of verbiage and has little significance; however, it was given back to S. Korea in 1994, not 1987 as in his comments.

As Mr. Kim agrees with my view of South Korea as a twice-populous, economically wealthier, and militarily well-equipped nation, I also agree with his view of North Koreans' heightened spirit for unification. When the two Koreas begin to speak on unification, North Korea should not ignore the desires of the South, whose population would be two thirds of a unified Korea, and South Korea should accommodate the value system of the North's one third. The economic wealth of the South would be an indispensable asset in helping to develop the North's industry. At the same time, the overly equipped and armed military on both sides should go through an immediate reduction.

As Mr. Kim put it, my little knowledge on the Korean question makes me agree with his view that Korea was divided by the U.S., and I am sure he knows well that the Soviet Union also played a part after the Japanese surrender. Furthermore, Koreans of left and right wing factions themselves must also be blamed, since they failed to establish a unified government despite arduous efforts by a group of earnest nationalists. Continued U.S. military presence and control over S. Korean military affairs 50 years after the Korean war will not be helpful in alleviating North-South tension. That is the reason I stressed that the U.S. should, as a first step, relinquish its military control over S. Korea. Holding the command authority of an independent state is against international justice and moral standards.

Another war in Korea should not be foreseen by any means in this day and age of human rights and respect for human lives. Any U.S. strike on North Korea would contradict its assurances given to the North against the threat and use of force, including nuclear weapons, in the U.S.-N. Korea Joint Statement of June 1993 and in the Geneva Framework Agreement of October 1994. Further, S.

Korea would oppose such a U.S. attack on N. Korea, as it had in June 1994 during the nuclear crisis.

Mr. Kim says that "the North-South hostilities have been provoked, stoked, fanned and played up by the Americans," and that "Kim Jong Il's view of the fundamental contradiction or hostility in Korea is not between Pyongyang and Seoul but that between the U.S. and the Korean people." If this is true, then it becomes imperative that both North and South Korea help each other to achieve a peace regime in the peninsula. North Korea should help the South by agreeing to a reunion of separated families and by continuing intergovernmental dialogue, since South Korea has extended enormous assistance to the North with food and fertilizer along with medicine and all kinds of economic benefits.

In June 1994, by the arrangement of former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, Kim Il Sung, then president of North Korea, proposed a first-ever summit with his South Korean counterpart, but he died before the scheduled meeting. Now both Kim Dae Jung of the South and Kim Jong Il of the North, through their own initiative, have pledged themselves to a historic first summit meeting in over a half century set for mid-June of 2000. This is high time for both Koreas to talk earnestly about all their arguments and differences, and settle these issues themselves for peace and stability in North East Asia.

### **III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses**

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: [napsnet-reply@nautilus.org](mailto:napsnet-reply@nautilus.org) . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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[Return to top](#)

[back to top](#)

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