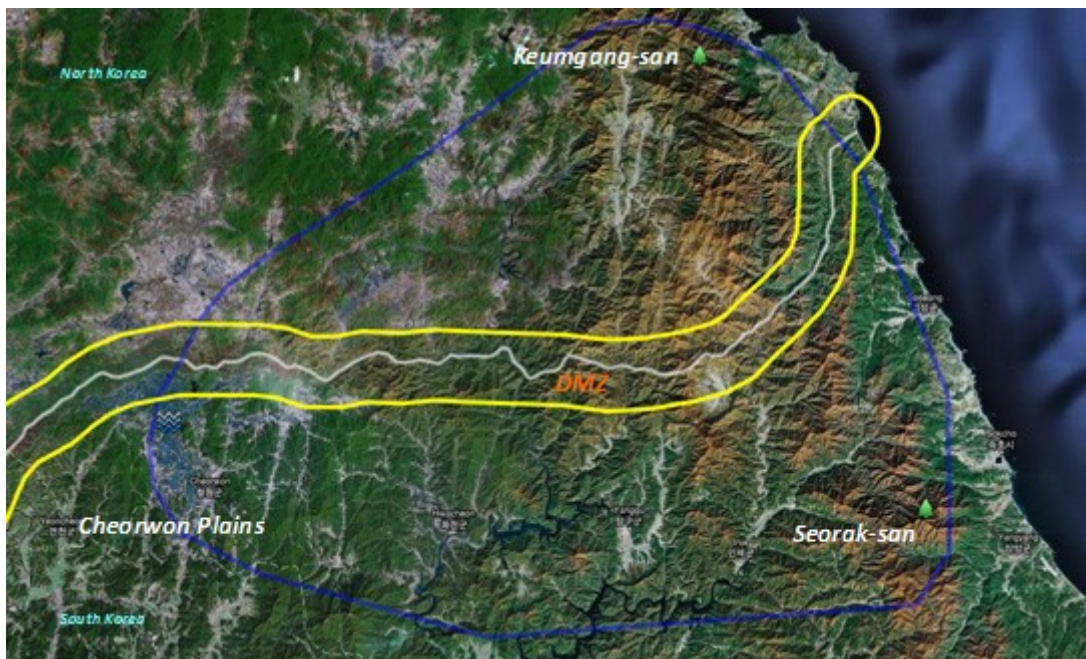


Nuclear threat and Korean reunification: Ultimately no avail

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by Ke Chung Kim

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I. Introduction

Recently, Peter Hayes presented an interesting paper "Nuclear Threat and Korean Reunification" in this Policy Forum.[\[1\]](#) His arguments prompted me to recall fundamental arguments on the centrality of Korea's environmental future in the rebuilding of North Korea and the reunification of Korea. Ever since the Korean vision became permanent at the signing of the 1953 Armistice, reunification has never left the mind and spirit of Korean people to this day. This brings us to the current debate on how to manage the North Korean nuclear threat and Korean reunification.

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II. Policy Forum by Ke Chung Kim

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Introduction

In a personal exchange Hayes wrote: "A non-Korean has much hubris to talk about reunification and I only did so pressed by my Korean hosts. I hope I wasn't too ignorant. I agree with your broad argument. But the question remains: will North Korea act in a way that allows the great powers, especially the US, to not push back hard on its nuclear breakout, wherever fault may lie in the past? I wish it were otherwise, but I doubt it--and therefore, it's incumbent on us to continue to lay the foundations for reversing their nuclear weapons threat while also restraining and reversing the nuclear weapons threats posed by the US, Russia and China..."[\[2\]](#) This paper provides my answer to this question.

From the hunter-gatherer days of our ancestry, humans have fought tribal wars to survive and advance and after each victory, have absorbed the opposition or "enemy." That is how humanity has expanded as a species to this day for every generation over the last 10,000 years. Thus, the rise of a new hegemony by the winning party with new weapons is nothing new to humans. Every modern war resulted in new armament by the winners, just as atomic bombs ended World War II. However, nuclear armament is different in that it is so destructive that it is no longer simply a weapon with which to win wars, like all the weapons before it. Rather, it is the ultimate weaponry that can defeat humanity as a whole because nuclear bombs are so monstrously damaging to nature that if detonated, all living things in human habitats in the affected region could disappear, mostly killed, along with massive environmental and infrastructure destructions.[\[3\]](#)

All living organisms are born to be altruistic for survival of their individual species. This is an important natural principle and also truly ingrained in the human species. Humans also are principally altruistic and protective of all other humans, far beyond ideological or religious purposes.[\[4\]](#) Our innate altruism should prohibit us from transforming nuclear armament into a self-

destructive tool that imperils the existence of the human species.

This principle requires that nuclear weapons not be used and has become enshrined in the “nuclear taboo” or norm that nuclear weapons must not be used. The six nuclear weapons states, Russia, China, Britain, France and the United States, ., the five UN/Security Council members, and Germany have all sought to reserve nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes only, and have attempted diplomatically to ensure that this conservative status quo that favors non-use of nuclear weapons endures indefinitely. With some significant exceptions, they have not used nuclear threat in international disputes, at least not for the most part with each other. After a rough start, India and Pakistan have adopted a similar stance, while Israel has kept its own nuclear deterrent as silent and invisible as possible.

Recently, however, this general principle has been broken and two states have issued new types of nuclear threats. These are Iran and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). That is a grave new trend that threatens nuclear disaster if not arrested.[5] Many well informed observers are skeptical that the recent agreement struck with the Islamic Republic of Iran by the United States and five other states will block Iran’s eventual possession of nuclear armament. As the risk remains, Iran will slowly gain the ability to build a nuclear arsenal for making bombs that can be used for intercontinental nuclear war.[6] The DPRK may precede Iran to become a long range nuclear-armed state in only a few years, certainly no more than a decade if things continue as they are now. Other states may follow these two in acquiring nuclear weapons in the future for use in local conflicts, or against other nuclear weapons states.

Today’s North Korea

North Korea is the last socialist state, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), occupying the northern half of the Korean peninsula along the 38th Parallel line and also a regular member of the United Nations.[7] North Korea is a largely mountainous country with bare mountains and the deteriorated environment in bad shape inhabited by 25 million+ people controlled by the Kim Jong-un government.[8] In the fall of 2013, I was privileged to make a weeklong visit to observe the North Korean landscapes through Pyongyang, Wonsan, Kaesong, and the northern corridor of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) including the Panmunjom. North Korea’s land and roadways looked clean and well kept but that also presented serious biodiversity loss although the latter is the foundation for sustaining our life-support system.[9] Even before the founding of the DPRK, Korea’s ecosystems that were already abused by Japanese annexation followed by massive destruction during Korean War, at which time many native species were lost on the both sides of Korea.[10]

North Korea as a nation in reality consists of three distinctive social and economic sectors: 1) Governance, dominated by the party, 2) Military enterprises, and 3) The working population. The governing sector is closely linked to the military sectors for their mutual sustainability and its resources and personnel are primarily located in and around the capital Pyongyang, whereas the working society of 25+ million common people is “self-supported” within a rationed economy organized in accordance with ideological and political concepts derived from Juché Doctrine and Military-First policy set by the DPRK government and the Korea Workers’ Party.

The nuclear threat and Korean reunification are two means whereby the governing and military sectors survive in spite of the boundless poverty and suppressed agony of the helpless, isolated ordinary people. The DPRK regime has been charged with human rights abuse by the UN Human Rights Office which Kim Jong Un and his government are attempting to ignore on the grounds of political independence and sovereignty. Many people around the world have begun to work actively to liberate the North Korean people from its current rules.

In 1948 the DPRK was built from the Soviet-backed provisional government by Kim Il-sung, the first leader of Korea Workers' Party and new DPRK who started the failed Korean War in 1953. After his death in 1994, his son Kim Jong-il took formal leadership and when he died, his son Kim Jong Un became the latest dynastic supreme ruler in ways reminiscent of the Choson Dynasty. The inevitable result of running North Korea as an orthodox 19th century polity in the 21st century is that it is afflicted with problems such as chronic energy and food shortage and religious suppression.[11] In many ways this dynastic governance is accepted by many ordinary North Korean people because they were born into and lived their entire lives the same socio-economic society under an extreme dictatorial system.

Indeed, all North Koreans live in this closed society watched continuously for any deviation from the official line, even within families, and bombarded daily with party directives and delusory information. There is no way to know what's going on in their homeland and nothing can be done by ordinary people to advance their status using their own initiative. Whether of the emerging middle class or from the lowest strata in terms of wealth, income, and status, most North Koreans have almost no information about the external world, how fast other nations are developed into advanced economies, and how far they have been left behind.[12]

As a result of this isolation, common people are obliged to become North Korean citizens by birth, living and education in the Juché society. In spite of their deprivation, most are dedicated to their motherland for their survival and seek a trouble-free life. Within this limited society and scarcity, most people try to make their life comfortable and to make the best out of their difficult daily life. Similarly, they want to be proud of what they have personally, do well with what resources are actually available, and try to work within the socialistic system. Otherwise, they follow, support or accommodate what DPRK government comes up with or demands including nuclear weapons development.[13]

Though rather limited during my short visit, I had numerous opportunities to meet and talk with different people in and out of restaurants, tours, monuments, museums and other occasion. I am confident that I understand how common people experience the government and the its demands and how they respond to ideological imperatives that has been relentless for the last six decades. North Koreans have developed a different culture and thought process from people in democratic societies, and they have learned what and how to handle and behave in almost all contexts and contacts so as to not transgress the limits imposed from above. In spite of the historic famine, poverty and chronic shortage of foods and health care they suffered through the third-generation of Kim Il-Sung Dynasty, they remain good citizens trying to make their life comfortable with pride and sincerity and peaceful with sufficient food and clean clothse in sustainable dwellings if available or provided.

Korea's Reunification: Illusion or War (14)

Historically, Korea has been an independent and unified country on the Korean peninsula. It is now permanently divided into two sovereign states. Toward the end of Yi Dynasty Korea was chaotic and politically fragmented that easily allowed the Japanese imperialists to occupy and ultimately to annex Korea to Japan in 1910. After only 35 years, Japanese colonization ended in the course of the defeat of Japan in World War II in 1945. At the same time, the briefly unified, liberated Korea was temporarily divided into two territories for expediting Japanese surrender, the southern part by the US forces and the northern half by Soviet forces. This division ultimately became permanent. North Korea already had the Korea Workers' Party which quickly declared the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). This was followed by the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south across the 38th parallel.

Ever since, the Korean people have longed for Korea to be reunited. That was recognized and promptly materialized in North Korea's policy that led to the rapid invasion of South Korea. This military move turned out to be far more than the unilateral attack for the purpose of Korea's unification. In reality, it was the first Korean War for the Cold War between the socialistic DPRK in the north backed by Soviet Union and the democratic ROK in the south supported by the United States. That phase ended shortly after the Chinese entry to the War. Ultimately, the war came to a halt by the creation of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) by the Armistice Agreement in 1953.[14] For the North, the DMZ continues to be viewed as the military buffer to this day. The military standoff at the DMZ is now complicated by the exchange of nuclear threat, by that from the United States and South Korea against the North; and from the North against the South and its ally, the United States.

The DMZ Ecosystems: Nature's Gem

The DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), the badly war-stricken land created by the Armistice Agreement in the middle of Korean Peninsula. Over the six decades, it has redeveloped into unique habitats for native biodiversity badly destroyed during the war and already lost in much of the provinces of North Korea. As native biodiversity continued to grow and expand, the DMZ has completely transformed into the nature's miracle ecosystems, the preserves of North Korean native biodiversity. That provides the foundational resources for rebuilding Korea's biodiversity and environment at large to celebrate the new Keum-su-Gang-San (, that is, a land of embroidered rivers and mountains: meaning "beautiful Korea"), the metaphorical description of the beautiful Korea. That could be a collective Korean goal and enterprise for the future of one Korea.

Ultimately, North Korea's nuclear program would likely be eliminated if only because nuclear weapons are abolished or are found to serve no purpose in prevailing in international disputes between states armed with nuclear weapons. Also, its policy of forceful Korean reunification has become a historical illusion for North Korea in every possible way.[15] Thus, North Korea may begin to see other values in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) than merely keeping it as a military buffer. The DMZ started as the military border to recognize the Korean division and then became the permanent wall separating the DPRK from the ROK in the South by the guarded corridor of demilitarized zone, with both sides protected by barb-wired fence and landmines.

The ecosystems along the entire DMZ corridor from the West off the Yellow Sea to the East coast toward the East Sea (= Sea of Japan), named "The DMZ Ecosystem" have been left undisturbed by humans and contain a continuum of representative Korean ecosystems with rich native biodiversity across the Korean peninsula. It has become the Nature's gem brought about from the remains of Korean War and be used to construct peace rather than to fight wars.[16]

Conclusion and Summary

The global trend is that no nuclear armed state has dared to use nuclear threat to settle political or military conflicts due to the immense risks of escalation. Many states have recognized that nuclear arms are the ultimate means of self-destruction for humanity. Nuclear threat has become obsolete, a primitive tool that cannot be used to settle political quarrels between nations. Nuclear threat should be removed from the toolkit of managing North Korea because nuclear threat are no longer a sound tool for resolving international political and humanistic disputes between the nations.[17]

Korean reunification remains the general wish and is in the direct interest of all Korean people, wherever they are located. The DPRK remains committed to reunifying the Korea, and this goal is reflected in its nuclear ambition. Yet, the DMZ reminds them that all their attempts to achieve reunification by military means and nuclear threat have failed. Using the DMZ as a military buffer and as a platform from which to project nuclear threat has simply reinforced their inability to

achieve their goals, including reunification. Thus, the ultimate strategic purpose of the North's nuclear threats is confusing and foggy, and seriously threatens not only South Korea, but the rest of Northeast Asia, and even China. Indeed, reference by Iran or North Korea to nuclear threats is more of an admission of weakness than strength, and the recent P5+1 agreement with Iran demonstrates that crude nuclear threat is a device from the past that is of less value by the day, rather than an asset that can be used to build a nation.

Unfortunately, North Korea continues to use their nuclear threat for promoting the Juché philosophy in pursuit of an orthodox dynastic strategy for reunifying Korea. Their nuclear arsenal is still limited and primitive, and are not yet primarily directed at actually fighting a war should one erupt, but are useful more for propaganda inside the country to demonstrate their strength and resolve in dealing with outsiders. It is best to not meet this madness head on with countervailing nuclear threat, but rather, to be prudent in dealing with North Korea's realistic military capacities.

Instead of increasing nuclear threat against the North, it is time now to consider several ways to sustain peace on Korean peninsula and help advance North Korea security while improving the life of ordinary North Koreans. I therefore conclude as follows:

- 1) Contemporary reunification is the outdated illusion as today's Korea is made of two different states, DPRK and ROK, with totally different social, economic, and political systems, albeit with cultural affinity and common history. There is no point on either side insisting on an illusion that cannot be accomplished by ideological and political competition or military actions. The only way forward is to seek mutual cooperation and advancement for North Korean people, and to take steps that enable North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un to revitalize North Korea as the motherland of its people.
- 2) South Korea and its allies and partners should promote the renewal of North Korea's environment and rehabilitation of its ecosystems, support the conservation and renewal of Korea's biodiversity and ecosystems, and promote the reforestation and agricultural advancement of North Korea's rural and remaining afforested regions. It should also commence serious conservation and research of the DMZ itself, all the while offering to collaborate with North Korean counterparts.
- 3) The South should support the advancement of arts and talented artists and artisans in North, and also the training and diffusion of skills involving hand work.
- 4) The two Koreas should share and exchange cultural, artistic and sport activities to rebuild a Korean ethos suitable for the 21st century.
- 5) The international community must assist the North by providing food, medicine, and other essential humanitarian inputs, especially for children who are the future of the motherland.
- 6) North Korean nuclear weaponry is already useless and cannot be used to reunify Korea on the North's terms, or for any other useful outcome. As being outdated, whether the North has nuclear weapons or not no longer matters to reunification. The North's nuclear weapons will demonstrate their own failure over time to the North Korean people. Thus, eventually the North will give up nuclear weapons in order to pursue peace, once it comes to terms with the illusion of forced reunification, and that nuclear threat can be used to effect reunification. It is the matter of peace for North Korean people who will have their say one day.

Image source: DMZ Forum

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