

Responses to “U.S. Responsibility to Support the Korean Accord” By Hwal Woong Lee



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Responses to "U.S. Responsibility to Support the Korean Accord" By Hwal Woong Lee

By Paul Chamberlin & Ralph A. Cossa

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July 10, 2000

I. Introduction

The following report contains two articles in response to Hwal Woong Lee's essay, "U.S. Responsibility to Support the Korean Accord" (PFO#00-05F).

The first comment is by Paul Chamberlin, a Korea specialist who is Vice President of International Technology and Trade Associates, Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in facilitating high technology trade and investment. Chamberlin disputes Lee's argument that the US is responsible for the fundamental problems plaguing modern Korea. Chamberlin defends the US historical and contemporary role in Korea, citing the current Perry Process and longer-term US efforts since the late 1980s to constructively engage the DPRK.

The second essay is by Ralph A. Cossa, Executive Director of Pacific Forum CSIS in Honolulu, Hawaii. Cossa also refutes Lee's interpretation of the US presence on the Korean Peninsula, saying that the US did attempt to reunify the Korean Peninsula by taking the War north of the 38th parallel, and that had it not, there would be a far greater number of people starving there. He also argues that the US is not forcing itself upon the ROK but is backing ROK President Kim Dae-jung's stand when it states its continued commitment to the alliance and to maintaining a presence on the Peninsula. He concludes that the US presence has made the Peninsula secure and that it should not be canceled hastily if the ROK sees a need to maintain peace.

II. Discussion

1. Comments by Paul Chamberlin

A. Introduction

The mid-June Korean summit provides hope for inter-Korean reconciliation. However, there are numerous issues Korean leaders and citizens living in the southern and northern parts of the Korean Peninsula need to resolve. How they do so is important, especially given the amount of incorrect and misleading information regarding the issues.

President Kim Dae Jung wisely asks Koreans to forgive the past and look to the future. However, there is a natural tendency to try and identify the reasons for today's problems. Of course, this can be very helpful if all concerned parties objectively seek the truth in context (and ideally with some degree of charity) and then commit to build on these truths to improve understanding and constructively chart a course for the future. Unfortunately, some searches become a "witch hunt" for villains and/or scapegoats. Mr. Lee reveals an understanding of U.S.-Korean history that completely blames the U.S. for modern Korea's most serious problems, reflecting, I fear, the views of many Koreans. He also implies the U.S. has not been supportive of President Kim Dae Jung's "sunshine policy" or the summit meeting that it produced. This is an amazing view in light of the current Perry Process and longer-term U.S. efforts since the late 1980s to engage North Korea constructively. I write as a friend of Korea to provide a perspective on some aspects of U.S.-Korean history since 1945 with the hope of building a clearer foundation for understanding the modern U.S.-ROK relationship.

Mr. Lee argues the U.S. is responsible for the fundamental problems plaguing modern Korea, specifically: Korean national division and several aspects of the Korean War. He also comments on U.S. Forces in Korea. In response, I respectfully offer the following points for consideration.

B. National Division

The Soviet Red Army could have unified the Korean Peninsula in August 1945 had the U.S. not intervened to stop its advance at the 38th parallel. The U.S. agreed during the November 1943 Cairo Conference that Korea should be free and independent in due course following the end of World War II. On August 10, 1945, Soviet Red Army forces entered Manchuria enroute to Korea, which at the time was considered to be part of imperial Japan. The nearest U.S. military units were far away on Okinawa, preparing to conduct combat operations against the Japanese homeland. The U.S. observed the Red Army advance with concern that Moscow's goal was to completely occupy the Korean Peninsula and make it a satellite state, as the Soviets had recently done in Eastern Europe. The U.S., therefore, on August 11 proposed a temporary military coordination line along the 38th parallel for Soviet and U.S. Army units, which facilitated subsequently receiving the arms of surrendering imperial Japanese military personnel. U.S. Army units did not enter Korea until September 8, 1945, roughly a month after the Red Army had already established a presence on the peninsula.

The ensuing years through mid-1950 was a very frustrating period for U.S. national security planners and Korean- policy makers for a number of reasons including Moscow's refusal to cooperate with numerous U.S. and United Nations efforts to achieve a free, independent, and unified Korean state. By mid-1948, it was obvious Korean unification was not imminent and on August 15, 1948 the people of southern Korea established the Republic of Korea (ROK) in accordance with democratic principals of self-government. North Koreans established the communist DPRK on September 8, 1948.

C. Korean War

There is no evidence that the U.S. had prior knowledge of North Korea's plan to invade the ROK on 25 June 1950, a Sunday. Members of the U.S. military advisory group in Korea were as surprised as U.S. Far East Command military commanders in Japan and national security planners in Washington, D.C. However, the U.S. responded promptly, surprising North Korea's Kim Il Sung who had assumed the U.S. would not or could not assist South Korea in time and who had completely ignored the ability of the United Nations to respond powerfully to his aggression. ROK-UN-U.S. victory was largely in question up until the successful landing at Inchon on September 15, 1950. The rapid retreat and disintegration of North Korean forces presented an opportunity to help the ROK unify the Korean Peninsula and the UN Command took it with the full support of the ROK government, evoking memories of the 1943 Cairo Conference agreement that Korea should be free and independent. Unfortunately, the U.S. misjudged Mao Tse Tung's willingness to assist Kim Il Sung, and the war became the protracted, brutal, bloody conflict with which we are familiar.

Mr. Lee alleges the U.S. wanted the North Koreans to prevail in the initial stages of the war in order to justify U.S. intervention, but this allegation does not take into consideration U.S. national security concerns at the time. The U.S. in the post-World War II period was focused on economic development and recovery domestically and abroad, especially in Western Europe. The primary threat to U.S. national security interests was the Soviet Union, specifically a Soviet attack against Western Europe. The U.S. assessed Kim Il Sung's invasion of South Korea as a diversionary attack ordered by Moscow to divert significant U.S. military resources to Asia and establish favorable conditions for the Soviets to attack Western Europe, as mentioned. The Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Omar Bradley, in fact, considered the Korean War as "the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong enemy." However, as a result of the North Korean invasion, the U.S. significantly increased its military capabilities to resist the expansion of Communist forces around the world.

Mr. Lee's argument that the "U.S. chose to withhold or delay military aid" in the context offered implies that President Truman, a former soldier and veteran of World War I, deliberately established a strategic environment in which he callously planned to thrust thousands of poorly trained and equipped U.S. troops to face likely death or grievous wounds on the Korean Peninsula. This is a serious charge that demands supporting evidence.

The truth, of course, is that the U.S. took immediate action to assist South Korea upon learning of the North Korean invasion on Sunday, June 25, 1950. On June 25, the U.S. led the United Nations Security Council to denounce the DPRK attack and then call on UN member nations to send materiel and forces to assist the defense of South Korea under a unified United Nations military command. On June 26, President Truman lifted all restrictions on U.S. air and naval forces to support the ROK south of the 38th parallel. On June 30, President Truman authorized the deployment of U.S. ground forces to South Korea. The first ground combat unit, the famous (but woefully inadequate) Task Force Smith, arrived in Pusan on July 1 and rushed north to engage lead elements of the North Korean 4th Infantry Division between Suwon and Osan on July 5. UN Command combat strength grew significantly in the ensuing weeks permitting the UNC finally to repel the North Korean attack and go on the offensive. Over the 37 months of the Korean War almost 37,000 U.S. soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines lost their lives to secure Korean freedom. Tens of thousand more suffered grievous wounds. By its very actions, the U.S. demonstrated it had been serious in its resource constrained post-World War II efforts to achieve a favorable outcome for Korea.

D. U.S. Forces in Korea and the U.S.-ROK Security Relationship

Mr. Lee's opinion that the "U.S. remains determined to keep its forces in South Korea despite Korean reconciliation" prompts two comments. First, the U.S. stations military forces in friendly countries only at the request of the country's duly established government. The government of the ROK believes it is in the national interest to maintain the security relationship with the U.S. and to host U.S. military forces. In fact, President Kim Dae Jung made this point directly to Chairman Kim Jong Il during one of the private summit meetings. Second, it seems premature to say Korean reconciliation is at hand, although one hopes that will be the result. One of the best indicators that reconciliation has been achieved will be that time when Koreans can freely visit relatives, places, and new friends on the other side of the "demilitarized zone." Such freedom of movement sadly does not appear to be at hand.

I personally hope to see Korea soon become a unified, democratic, independent country with a thriving free market that offers boundless opportunities for Korea's diligent, hard working people, some of whom are very dear to me. Charting a course to achieve such a vision requires wisdom, courage, patience, and a clear understanding of the past. President Kim Dae Jung demonstrates all of these virtues embodied in Christian charity. I pray God will continue to bless him.

2. Comments by Ralph A. Cossa

Mr. Hwal-Woong Lee's comments are no doubt well-meaning and sincere but filled with faulty logic and misperceptions.

True, the U.S. did draw the line at the 38th parallel but this was because Russian forces had already proceeded below that line. The Peninsula was already divided by the time the line was drawn. One can still "blame" America for the division, however. Had the U.S. not expended many American lives and great fortune, the Peninsula would have been reunited in 1950, and today we would have 60 million starving people on the Peninsula rather than 20 million. Of course, the U.S. did try to reunite the Peninsula during the War by taking the War north of the 38th parallel; something that Mr. Lee

faults America for.

As I talk to American officials today (and I am not a member of the government nor a spokesperson for it), I sense a great deal of enthusiasm and support for the summit and for President Kim's courageous leadership. But, President Kim has laid out the rationale for a continued American presence and the US is not forcing itself upon Korea but backing President Kim's stand when it states its continued commitment to the alliance and to maintaining a presence on the Peninsula. As the U.S. demonstrated in the Philippines, if the host government tells US forces to leave, Washington has no option but to respect these wishes. The same holds true on the Korean Peninsula. But, this is a decision that should not be taken lightly. Koreans historically have described their nation as a shrimp among whales, afloat in a dangerous sea, hoping not to be swallowed up by one of their giant neighbors. A continued alliance with the US is the best insurance against a rebirth of historic rivalries, in which Korea is often caught in the middle. But, that is Seoul's choice. For the US to offer to withdraw, at a time when Korea's security is still threatened (the North has, to date, taken no steps to demilitarize or to engage in military confidence building measures or military transparency), would be irresponsible.

I have been among those security analysts expressing caution, not because the North's current actions do not represent an historic breakthrough -- they do -- but because the Peninsula remains a dangerous place and both sides must feel secure if they are to proceed with peace. That is why I have argued that China and Russia should step forward and give Pyongyang the same defensive security guarantees as the US provides the ROK, so that the embryonic peace process can continue.

The US presence in the ROK has made the Peninsula secure since the 1953 Armistice. It can continue to serve this role, even after reconciliation or reunification, if the Korean government and Korean people see the wisdom of retaining this insurance policy. It should not be canceled hastily.

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 . 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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