Policy Forum 00-05G: The Shifting Korean Ideological Divide

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Recommended Citation

Han Sung-Joo, "Policy Forum 00-05G: The Shifting Korean Ideological Divide", NAPSNet Policy Forum, July 11, 2000, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/the-shifting-korean-ideological-divide/

Nautilus Institute PFO 00-05: Koreans Take Steps to Solve Their Own Problems

PFO 00-05G: July 11, 2000

The Shifting Korean Ideological Divide

By Han Sung-Joo

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I. Introduction

This is the fourth in a series of articles on the recent ROK-DPRK summit. This essay was contributed by Han Sung-Joo, Professor of International Relations at Korea University and former ROK Foreign Minister. Han made these remarks at the 50th Anniversary Commemorative Conference on "The Korean War: Forgotten No More," held at Georgetown University in Washington, DC on June 23.

Han reviews the history of ideological shifts in the ROK, noting that the divide between left and right becomes apparent whenever the ROK loosens up politically. He argues that while the ROK-DPRK summit has reinvigorated anti-US sentiment in the ROK, when the euphoria from the summit dies down, most people will realize that the costs of keeping US troops in the ROK is worth it to deter war.

II. Essay by Han Sung-Joo

The Shifting Korean Ideological Divide: From the Korean War to the Pyongyang Summit

Han Sung-Joo

My original intention was to talk about how the issue of responsibility for the Korean War and division of the peninsula has been handled in South Korean politics. But in the wake of the Pyongyang summit, I thought it would be useful to broaden the subject a bit, to place the Korean War in the context of the evolving ideological configuration of Korea. That is, I will try to outline how the War is linked with the ideological cleavage that characterizes Korean public opinion today, in the wake of the atmospherics surrounding the Pyongyang summit.

A quarter century ago - about half the time between the War and now -- I published a book entitled, "The Failure of Democracy in South Korea." The main theme was that there is a deep ideological divide in Korean politics, a veritable chasm between the left and the right. It is a gap that is not apparent much of the time because usually one side or the other of the contending ideologies is predominant. But the differences do surface whenever political control loosens up. At the time I was happy to find a similar observation in an article written by then eminent professor at York University, Professor Kim Kyung-Won.

It is difficult and perhaps futile to try to define what left and right mean ideologically in Korean politics, especially in a short speech like this. In relation to the Korean War, however, the respective positions are rather straightforward. The right believes that it was Kim Il-Sung who instigated the

War, causing millions of deaths and untold miseries to the whole Korean people, North and South. On the other hand, the left generally does not accept that Kim Il-Sung was responsible for the War and, in any case, they argue it is irrelevant. But they blame the United States for the division and the rightists in the South for refusing to agree on unification.

The Korean War, which magnified the ideological divide that had been apparent before 1950, at the same time helped mask the division by enabling the orthodox right to silence completely any dissenting voice. But that voice would emerge again in conjunction with the democratic movements that fought against the authoritarian governments of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo-Hwan. In the meantime, the leftist voice, indeed chorus, would noticeably amplify whenever the government relaxed its grip, as in 1960 after the student uprising, in 1980 after the death of Park Chung Hee, in 1988 after the launching of the Roh Tae-Woo government, and since the election of President Kim Dae-Jung in 1998.

Today, the left finds fertile ground to promote its interpretation of the Korean War and the U.S. role in Korea. There are three main reasons for this: generational change, the change of leadership in North Korea, and a more permissive if not indulgent government in the South.

The generational change is very significant. An overwhelming majority of South Koreans were born after the end of the Korean War. As such, they do not know or care why the Americans came to fight half a century ago. It doesn't occur to them to wonder what would have happened if North Korea had succeeded in taking over the South. They do not ask what has kept another war from occurring during the past five decades. Indeed, they question why the American troops are still in Korea, and seize on such controversies as Nogun-Ri, Maehyang-Ri (related to U.S. Air Force practice bombing) and Status of Forces Agreement issues.

The right had their last hurrah in 1994 after the death of Kim Il-Sung. At that time, some leftist students set up memorial altars on campus for Kim Il-Sung while a few politicians suggested that South Korea send a mourning delegation to Pyongyang. But they were dismissed by the right, which was deeply angered by the suggestion of honoring a person they considered a war criminal. In December the previous year, I had my own encounter with those on the right when The New York Times ran an article about me (in fact, written by David Sanger who is attending this meeting). Among other things, the piece told how I was wounded during the Korean War and then helped by a North Korean soldier. For several months and years, then, I was criticized for admitting that there was even one good man in the North Korean People's Army. On the other hand, by the left I am considered too pro-American and not nationalistic enough.

Now, in the wake of the Kim Jong-Il show in Pyongyang, the voice of the right rings discordant. The summit was a smashing success in shoring up the image not only of Kim Jong-Il, but of North Korea itself. One could even go so far as to say that if Kim Jong-Il was attempting his own Sunshine Policy, his version has managed to outshine the original.

Even those who counsel a more balanced approach are drowned out by the cheers of those who have fallen under the spell of the supposedly charming Kim Jong-Il. Suddenly there is little enthusiasm to be reminded of what happened five decades ago or who actually invaded whom, much less to commemorate the event in any significant way. Ironically, the war that in Korea has never for a moment been forgotten is now in danger of becoming so.

The Korean attitude toward the U.S. is a classical case of "familiarity breeding contempt." The United States is not only blamed for the division of Korea and therefore for the War itself. It is also criticized for its acceptance of successive authoritarian regimes and failure to prevent the Kwangju massacre in 1980. You may recall that, during the 1988 Seoul Olympics, many Korean spectators

rooted for the Russian basketball team over the Americans. Likewise, I would venture that if North Korean fans were free to choose their own favorites, they might root for the Americans rather than the more familiar Russian or Chinese competitors.

Given the pendulum-like nature of Korean ideology, how long will the infatuation with Kim Jong-Il and the North go on? What will be its effect on the U.S.-ROK alliance and on the status of the U.S. troops in Korea? President Kim Dae-Jung, even as he declares that we should no longer worry about another war on the peninsula, says that the U.S. troops can stay in Korea since Kim Jong-Il agreed with him on their necessity for maintaining regional peace and stability. But whether or not Kim Jong-Il actually wants the withdrawal of U.S. troops, their continued presence is increasingly becoming an issue among Koreans, as it probably is within the United States.

Ultimately, however, I believe cooler heads will prevail, even in Korea. When the dust from the Kim Jong-Il performance settles, people will recall that North Korea still poses a serious security threat with over a million troops, forward deployed, and an arsenal of missiles and chemical and biological weapons. They will recognize that the people in North Korea are suffering from oppression as well as hunger. They will appreciate that the cost of keeping U.S. troops in the South is a well worth deterring war. The current epidemic of Pyongyang fever will abate and anti-U.S. sentiment will subside. The real question is whether the U.S. and South Korean governments have the patience and wisdom to weather this tempest and ride out these waves. Any hasty reaction in this regard will only aggravate what is already a worrisome situation.

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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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