

Armistice Anniversary: Two Koreas for now, one people forever

On July 27, veterans from 16 nations gathered at Panmunjom, the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea, to mark the 50th anniversary of the Korean war armistice. The war resulted in the deaths of more than two million citizens, but for the average Korean, July 27 was just another Sunday.

Apathy or indifference might be the reason, as South Korea's lagging economy takes main stage, but perhaps people are also aware that a divide country, a volatile border with 37,000 US and 700,000 South Korean troops, and what seems to be a permanent state of instability, are not worth celebrating. With no peace treaty, the two sides are technically still at war.

Koreans are known for their uncompromising attitudes, but they can hardly shoulder the full burden of their present situation. In 1947, the Allied and Soviet-occupied "Korean situation" went before the United Nations, but the parties were unable to reach a unanimous decision. War began in 1950, a truce was called three years later, and so this sordid saga of a country divided by larger powers—a pawn in the global game of geopolitics—remains unsolved. The result for years was a community dynasty in one half, and until recently, a military dictatorship labelled a democracy in the other.

Tensions are soaring due to a crumbling regime in the North, with nuclear potential and a starving population: a South that enjoys relative prosperity but is facing economic doubts and constant political scandal; the growth of China as a major South Korean trading partner; the legacy of Japanese colonialism; and the ever-expanding might of the US empire.

South Koreans, spurred on by what they perceive to be a failure of the "sunshine policy"—former president Kim Dae-Jung's strategy of engagement with the North – to deliver hard results, yet encouraged by public discussion of reunification, are growing agitated not only with their own government, but with current US policy. The bottom line is that South Koreans want peace somehow, and soon.

Most South Koreans resent the provocation from both North Korea and the United States. They do not trust the North, but the overwhelming majority says that engagement, aid, trade, discussion, and exchange are the way forward. People blame politicians from all sides for the uncertainty and say the US name-calling, military swaggering and moves that would provoke an already unpredictable North could yield potentially disastrous consequences. Roh Moo-hyun was elected president last December on the promise that he would lead South Korea in a new direction, but his failure thus far has taken a toll on his popularity.

The tide is turning against the US refusal to normalize relations with North Korea. Bellicose discussions about pre-emptive surgical strikes are easy from the comforts of the White House, but to citizens in Seoul just a few hours from the border, war means devastation and death. The Korean peninsula was a battleground for other nations during the 20th century, but these days South Koreans are not just getting tired of it—they are getting angry.

A 12 year old summed up many attitudes: "The US is a big country. They think they can push people around. This is not good. But we need their military. We're a small country. But North Koreans—they are Koreans, too. We are the same culture and people. It is sad if we fight. How can we?"

Surprisingly, despite media reports on Kim Jong-Il's missiles, drug deals and arms trading, the vast majority of South Korean do not support aggressive action. North Korea may be part of US President George W. Bush's "axis of evil", but South Koreans want a peaceful, non-military solution.

This is a reflection of a desire for peace and the basic solidarity they feel with the population over the border. After all, they share a language and history, and tragically, many are from the same family. All Koreans agree that the path towards reunification is difficult, but say it is inevitable.

Reunification is no longer about a country's right to self-determination. It has also begun to serve as a platform for the anti-war movement. In the past, the South Korean peace movement was just about reunification, but the definition has broadened and there is a greater attempt to grasp North Korean motives. Americans are surprised by South Korean criticism of US foreign policy, but people are quick to say this does not mean they are anti-American—many Americans do not support current US policy either. Choi Yung-chan, a leader of the student and worker group, All Together, said: "To understand the North, you have to know why they were driven to build nuclear weapons. They feel threatened—and Iraq confirmed that."

South Koreans are rethinking the ethics and benefits of unquestioning US loyalty, particularly if it serves to stoke the fires of instability. The population remains divided about the US troop presence. Is North Korea the next target of US intervention? What does that mean for South Korea and the peninsula? Are the interests of the US in line with the interests of South Korea? Where do the two Koreans stand in the global order?

Hong Joo Young, 25, is studying for the law exam and graduated without having attended a single demonstration. Yet she objects to the US presence, does not believe the North would invade if the American troops left, disapproves of South Korea's support of the US invasion of Iraq and sees reunification as inevitable and necessary, no matter the cost. "I'm always thinking of the economy, but peace is first," she said. "Before the Iraq war, I thought about reunification in a negative way. But now I think differently. George W. Bush rationalizes war, but there is no rationalization for war."

To understand the current climate, one should examine the Korean language. Unlike English speakers who talk of "my country", when Koreans refer to their nation they say *woori nara*, "our country". Collective identity as one Korean people and nation is strong.

Today they are no longer content to be viewed as an extension of other Asian powers, or as a base for US interests. What they are saying is, let us decide what happens. It is not "your" country, it is not "their" country, it is "our country".

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