

Unified Korea - An Ongoing Problem

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The South Korean constitution recognizes all Koreans as its citizens.

- [An interesting Reuters article](#) ^[a]

I didn't have a quote in mind with which to really start this blog and going from zero to one is tough, so I checked the front page of Wikipedia. Of course, the recent US-DPRK (North Korea) summit was at the top of the list and a search in my doc for Korea revealed this interesting manifestation of the 1953 armistice.



I was in South Korea a couple of weeks ago and I'll probably speak to my thoughts on South Korean culture (hyper-consumerist!) in a later blog post but I'd like to focus today on the step required to fulfill the sentiments expressed by both ROK (South Korea) President Moon Jae-In, US President Donald Trump and DPRK Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un to formally end the war and what the Korean Peninsula make look like going forward.

The heart of the problem is that both the DPRK and ROK claim to be the sole legitimate leader of the Korean peninsula (kind of like the PRC/ROC (China/Taiwan) debate but one between more equal parties at least in a geographic and (nuclearized) military sense) and refuse to recognize the sovereignty of the other in international forums such as the UN. Ending the war requires formally acknowledging that there are two Koreas—a blow to the pride of both leaders—or reunifying the country (the less likely but more interesting hypothetical to explore). [2]

Even with genuine will on both sides of the DMZ to reunify (this short sentence has many more known unknowns and unknown unknowns than words in it). Korean unification faces severe geopolitical barriers given the untenable nature of such a deal to the proxies supporting either country—not to mention the extensive cultural and economic issues that would follow if the border were to simply be opened (a future post perhaps).

If the South maintains the strong alliance it has had with the United States (wherein ~25k US troops are installed on the peninsula), South Korean control of the country is untenable to the Chinese. This was seen in October 1950 when Chinese troops crossed the Yalu River and pushed UN Forces who had nearly defeated communist forces back to the 38th parallel. It is worth noting that the 38th parallel has marked the North-South split since the conclusion of the Second World War when Korea was partitioned into US and Soviet occupation zones (an effect of the nearly 40-year Japanese occupation which limited Korean capacity for immediate self-governance). The Chinese also supported the efforts of the North Vietnamese to take control of their South. More recently, Sino-South Korean relations suffered in early 2017 after the installation of the US designed THAAD anti-ballistic missile system—severely impacting Chinese tourism to South Korea and South Korean businesses within China. [3]

While the global order in which the US has played a central role for the last 70 years may be shifting amid the rise of China, the US has had an active military presence (including the deployment of nuclear weapons) in South Korea for the entirety of this order and there is strong momentum in favor of this continuing.

Though parties and motives have shifted, the Cold War is very much alive on the Korean peninsula and I find myself reflecting on the inscription on both the Korean War Veteran's Memorial in Washington DC and at the War Memorial of Korea in Seoul:

“Our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met.”

Some may argue that the names of the Allied Forces written in the tall airy wings of War Memorial of Korea's are those of soldiers who did very little; the war is not over, the border across the 38th parallel is the same as the original 1949 partition, etc. They are not correct. South Korea is a

prosperous nation and a wonderful partner of the United States in the spread of democracy and freedom across the world. I sure hope it stays that way.

Related reading:

An interesting exhibition of the design of objects and utilitarian focus given lack of competition in the DPRK. I noticed this a couple of years back when I was in Cuba-billboards were advertisements for the state.

When I cross posted this on [my Medium](#) ^[b] on 06/26/19 I added some reflection:

[1] If you click the Google Maps link you'll realize it's not the best way to get around Korea. Try the maps made by Kakao!

[2] So um, yeah, nothing really happened in the last year... of course, there was the hug and stuff but it seems like a continuation of the cycle that's played out over the last three-ish decades :/

[3] People seemed quite worried about this when I was in Korea but seems like this got fixed.

Links

- a. [reuters.com/article/us-thailand-northkorea-refugees-idUSKBN1AH3SR](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-northkorea-refugees-idUSKBN1AH3SR)
 - b. medium.com/@spencerburleigh
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