

BEYOND SUMMIT DIPLOMACY THE TWO KOREAS' QUEST FOR RECONCILIATION

The Korean Summit of June 2000 changed nothing, but the Korean Peninsula will never be the same. Profuse public displays of civility between the leaders of South and North Korea cannot wipe away a half a century of mutual distrust and hostility, of killing one another, and of exchanging insults. Further complicating the situation is the anger and pain nurtured in the minds of contemporary Koreans by a century of Japanese imperialism, division by the US and the Soviet Union, the Korean War and the subsequent efforts of the rival superpowers to recreate their half of the Korean Peninsula in their own image.

A single summit and good intentions on both sides cannot erase the painful past. Nor can a single, short event merge the North's authoritarian political system with the South's maturing democracy, and the North's socialist economy with the South's capitalist system. Even millions of dollars of trade and economic "cooperation" between Seoul and Pyongyang cannot build mutual trust and respect between the two Koreas. Before this long, arduous process can even begin, the superpowers will have to follow the example of Korea's leaders and decide to end to the Cold War and Korean War on the Korean Peninsula. Until Washington and Tokyo, Beijing and Moscow agree to cease using the Korean Peninsula as the arena for their rivalry, enduring reconciliation will continue to elude the Korean people north and south of the De-militarized Zone.

The exchanges of warm greetings and vigorous handshakes between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il's were far more than essential ceremonial gestures. These humble human expressions of civility confirmed to Koreans everywhere the commitment of their political leaders to begin the process of ending the Korean War and the rivalry that has since plagued the Korean Peninsula. The meeting symbolized defacto mutual recognition that two governments rule the Korean Peninsula. The two Kims' joint declaration affirmed that national reconciliation and unification is a matter of self determination that does not concern foreign powers.

People prone to assign meager significance to these developments would do well to reflect on the recent past. Knowledge of history helps us bring into sharper focus subtle changes and assess them with greater accuracy.

A great deal had to change before President Kim and Supreme Command Kim could meet in Pyongyang. Each Korea separately had to decide to discard policies and attitudes rooted in Cold War animosity and military rivalry. Each government had to reorient its priorities by shifting from a preoccupation with the past to a greater concern for the future. Compassion in South Korea for the welfare of North Koreans had to supplant fear and hatred bred during the Korean War and nurtured ever since by both sides obsession with military might. Policy priorities had to be realigned. Economic prosperity in the South and economic stagnation in the north enabled both sides to decide putting reconciliation and economic cooperation ahead of deterrence is in their mutual interest.

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the two Koreas will elude. One war is global, the other largely a regional duel. For the United States, the Cold War persists in Northeast Asia despite the collapse of the "evil empire" or the Soviet Union's" a decade ago and the continuing transformation of "Red China" from communism to capitalism. While the US and China contend for hegemony in Northeast Asia and the Taiwan Straits, South and North Korea duel intensely for political legitimacy and military supremacy on the Korean Peninsula. Russia's economic woes have diminished its influence, at least for the time being, in the region. But the US pursuit of a "National Missile Defense" has revived Russia security concerns and fostered detente between Beijing and Moscow. Old patterns of alliance, unlike old soldiers, do not wade away. Instead, they persist and haunt the future.

The same can be said of the Korean Peninsula. For the past half century, Seoul and Pyongyang have competed in every conceivable manner to determine the victor of the Korean War and to proclaim supremacy and the legitimacy to rule the entire Korean Peninsula. Since the two nations' establishment after 1948, the regimes in each half of the peninsula have mirrored one another in their duel. Each aligned itself with superpowers. Pyongyang leaned toward Moscow and Beijing while Seoul depended heavily on Washington and eventually Tokyo. Outwardly, each side cloaked the competition in a dichotomy of good versus evil, capitalism versus communism, democracy versus despotism. Both regimes in the North and South proclaimed themselves "democratic."

Actually, however, neither could rightfully make such a claim. In reality, both were ruled by ruthless authoritarian regimes. Frankly speaking, the rulers of the South from 1963 to 1988 could rightfully claim to be democratic. On the contrary, both Presidents Park Chung Hee or his successor President Chun Doo Hwan seized power using military force and perpetuated their rule using intimidation, the curtailment of human rights and corrupt political practices to retain their positions. North Korea's rulers did likewise.

The constant, intense and demeaning exchange of insults shrouded the reality. Good versus evil, freedom versus slavery had little to do with the frequently fiery exchange of rude and demeaning rhetoric, and all too often dangerous exchange of gun fire along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Both regimes promised their people reunification but only intensified mutual misunderstanding and the potential for another Korean War. Each side's champions proudly and boldly verbalized their unwavering support for their favorite, the South or the North. Each claimed to be pursuing a strategy of deterring war. All the while, however, their efforts intensified the risk of war that sliced the once millennium long unified Korean Peninsula into two hostile warring camps.

The competition early on became one of amassing economic and military aid from their respective supporters. Both sought military and waged contemporary reality, however, in a contest. Despite the dramatic alteration of the region's political reality, within the context of its geo-political of the superpowers