

Going Over the Number 70 in Divided Korea

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This year marks 70 years since the division of Korea. From August 1945, the Korean Peninsula has been split between a communist North and democratic South. Unificationists know Reverend Moon foretold, exemplified by a 1985 conference, that the Soviet Union would collapse after going over the number 70, figured from 1917. While it took four more years, highlighted by the Soviet experiment with *perestroika* and *glasnost*, President Gorbachev resigned and dissolved the USSR on Christmas Day 1991.

With the Unification movement focused on Vision 2020, it begs the question: “Can the Korean

Peninsula be reunified by the end of this decade?” or, at least, “Will the two Koreas develop a peaceful and constructive relationship, ending their decades of hostility and division?”

East Asia knows the special significance of 2015. For Korea, China, and Southeast Asia, it is a year to commemorate their liberation from Japanese military occupation. For Korea, 1945 also marked the end of 40 years of Japanese colonial domination and annexation. For Japan, as it has already experienced in recent months, this year has been a painful reminder of its wartime legacy in Asia, and the expectations of its victims of 70 years ago for Japan to sincerely apologize and take responsibility for the profound harm it caused. It’s also a time when East Asia is reacting to China’s bid for regional hegemony, given it recently became the world’s largest economy.



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For Koreans north and south, this year also marks the 15th anniversary of the historic summit meeting between the North’s Kim Jong Il and the South’s Kim Dae Jung. Both leaders are no longer alive, but Kim Dae Jung’s widow is expected to make a goodwill visit to Pyongyang later this month to commemorate the June 2000 summit. Sadly, little progress was made between the two Koreas after that first summit, and in particular since 2010, their relations have gone steadily downhill.

The first commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II took place May 9 in Moscow, where Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, China’s President Xi Jinping, and other world leaders to mark the Allied victory in Europe. Up until the last moment, it was expected that current North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, would attend; but he canceled his trip.

Until April, there was even a slim hope that South Korean president Park Geun-hye would also attend the ceremonies. However, because the United States and other Western states refused to send their leaders to Moscow due to Russia’s aggression in the Ukraine last year, South Korea followed suit. Yet, this was a missed opportunity for the leaders of the two Koreas to meet in a multilateral setting.

Moreover, very meager efforts have been made by both Koreas to communicate and cooperate since the beginning of this year. December 2014 marked three years since Kim Jong Un had been in power following his father’s death. Most experts assess he is clearly in control in the North, has achieved regime stability, and even made marginal improvements in the meager economy. If the South had any doubts it had a potential negotiating partner by then, they should have been dispelled.

January this year was ripe with opportunity for some dramatic moves on the part of the South, which, as the obvious victor in the inter-Korean competition, is in a position to be magnanimous and take bold initiatives. Instead, nothing happened, and as sure as the change of seasons, once we reached February, with the onset of annual US-ROK joint military exercises, the North predictably reacted with vituperation and hostility.

Last year, the South became enmeshed in mounting problems that, in the least, distracted President Park from pursuing meaningful initiatives with the North. Most notably was the *Sewol* ferry disaster that April in which nearly 300 drowned, mostly high school children. Lax safety regulations and corruption were blamed as the underlying causes of this tragedy that has deeply and negatively affected the perceptions of South Korean youth of their elders and the government.

But it was not simply unexpected domestic problems that diverted President Park from pursuing her *trustpolitik* policy, which she announced before the U.S. Congress in 2013. No South Korean president has given better speeches on the promise and benefits of Korean unification than President Park (including for a DMZ peace park). From her speeches alone, one can almost touch and taste unification (though her referring to it with the gambling term “jackpot” had negative connotations). She even set up and chairs an advisory Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation.

Yet, they were only words. It seems the time-honored de facto South Korean policy — expecting the DPRK to change first and make major concessions with little-to-nothing in return from the ROK — is alive and well. Having followed North-South Korean relations on a daily basis for 25 years, I see today almost no serious political commitment and determination on the part of the South to improve relations with its northern neighbor. I’ve concluded, much as with Israel’s fraught relationship with the Palestinians, that the status quo is far too convenient and comfortable — for each nation best positioned to make a difference — to risk bold action.

As with Israel and Palestine, the underlying ROK policy toward the DPRK is to manage long-term conflict with the goal of maintaining the status quo, no more. Lip service is paid to a two-state solution by Israel, but it is mere posturing without serious intent. President Park’s government pays eloquent lip service to Korean unification; but fundamentally for domestic policy reasons — fear that genuine efforts to reach out to the North would upend party politics — the South presumes it’s too risky to do more than contain and manage the North Korean problem as it has since the Korean War. For many ROK policymakers, another excuse given is “the North is bound to collapse soon” — a discredited theory since the death of Kim Il Sung over 20 years ago.

From a Unificationist perspective, both places are holy lands: one is the land of the Bible, the other, Korea, is the fatherland of our faith and birthplace of our founders. It would not be surprising that there is a linkage between what happens in the former and what occurs in the latter. A common problem is an unwillingness to alter a pattern that has existed since the end of World War II — despite vastly changed circumstances. “Managing conflict” has a nice ring, but it connotes a belief that there are no good solutions, and more importantly, a *lack of desire* for real solutions. For both holy lands, some of the intransigence is attributable to extreme nationalism and ethnocentrism; but much is also due to a profound disregard for the welfare of people who either are under your control or your long-suffering neighbor.



While director of the Europe-Korea Foundation in May 2002, Park Geun-hye (left) met the late North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang. However, as ROK President, she has not met his heir, Kim Jong Un.

When President Park took office in February 2013, like many, I was elated South Korea could elect its first woman president, much less the daughter of a previous president who lifted the South up from the ashes. Her inauguration took place just months after the passing of Rev. Moon and almost contemporaneous with the first Foundation Day. For Unificationists and non-Unificationists alike, there were high expectations for what President Park would bring. But her first two years in office have been a major letdown in terms of her northern policy, even when compared to her bolder predecessor at the Cold War’s end, President Roh Tae-woo (1988-93).

Perhaps the problem is not the leader but the sociopolitical culture in which he or she works. How can you lead a people to reconcile with an

enemy and antagonist when there is lacking a desire by the populace to change their basic reality? It’s a pity the North is looked upon by much of the South’s population as at best a nuisance, or worse, their crazy neighbors to be avoided. Except for the elders who remember the Korean War and its separation of families, younger generations in the South seem to prefer an indefinite division of the peninsula for the sake of their own material well-being.

This year is still young. A low-key civilian inter-Korean event will occur in mid-June to commemorate the first summit. More importantly, on August 15, the date they celebrate as Liberation Day, a higher-level exchange could occur between North and South, although a summit is a longshot. The number 70 only comes once; to ignore 2015’s significance would be foolish for both Koreas. But meaningful, long-lasting change happens only with a clear-cut change of attitude and eventually of policy. Without these, at best, we will see one-time symbolic events observed by the Koreans which will be forgotten in weeks.

To go over the number 70 — for the North to grasp the hand of the South in an act of accommodation, while reducing overbearing Chinese pressure — requires the South actually to *extend* its hand rather than voice mere rhetoric. The South should passionately and aggressively promote opening of the DMZ

border, integration of roads and rail lines, the flow of goods, eventually leading to merger, integration and reunification. Absent real action, instead we might see a prolongation of this 70-year period of peninsular division because a potential partner for peace preferred keeping things just the way they are.

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