

1945

A Peace Declaration To End The Korean War: An Idea Whose Time Has Come?

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December 14, 2021

South Korean President Moon Jae-in announced that the North has agreed “in principle” to a peace declaration. The US and Republic of Korea reportedly have been working on a draft agreement. China apparently indicated its support. What could possibly go wrong?

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, aka North Korea, of course.

According to Moon, the North won’t join any talks until Washington drops its “hostile policy,” which is usually thought to mean the presence of US troops on the Korean peninsula and other military activities.

The ever-hopeful Moon admitted: “because of that, we are not able to sit down for a negotiation on the declarations between South and North Korea, and those between North Korea and United States.” This would seem to present a significant barrier to success. Responded Moon: “we hope that talks will be initiated. We are making efforts towards that.”

Alas, “hope” is not something one normally associates with anything involving North Korea.

The peace declaration is an issue because the Koreas, as well as US and China, are still technically at war. Hostilities in July 1950 were ended by an armistice but no peace treaty was subsequently agreed to. This is not unusual. Often armies stop shooting at one another and people get on with their lives. Then statesmen eventually cobble a formal treaty together. As between America and Germany after World War I.

In 1919 the US Senate refused to ratify the Versailles Treaty, Woodrow Wilson’s tragically misguided and vainglorious attempt to transform the world. American and German troops did not return to the trenches. Rather, in July 1921, during the presidency of Wilson’s successor, Warren Harding, Congress approved the Knox-Porter Resolution, which ended the state of war. A formal peace treaty was negotiated and ratified later that year.

No such amity was displayed by the Koreas or their patrons, the US and People’s Republic of China, when the fighting stopped. Relations were frigid, even by the standards of the Cold War. Hostilities frequently flared on the Korean peninsula. Washington and Beijing did not talk

seriously until the Nixon opening in 1971. And despite intermittent North-South contacts over the years, the end of the Cold War worldwide did little to thaw relations on the peninsula.

The 2018 Trump opening to the DPRK raised the possibility of some form of peace affirmation. A formal treaty would make the most sense but would have to be negotiated. And would require the parties to talk, raise inconvenient issues, and ratify a potentially complicated and controversial text.

In contrast, a peace declaration would be merely that: a pronouncement that the peninsula is at peace and the parties have warm affection in their hearts for one other. Moon's hope is that this would lead to more and more substantive talks. He argued: "This is going to help us start negotiations for denuclearization and peace." He even termed it "very important on that front as well." Lee In-young, the South's Minister of Unification—a frustrating position if ever one existed!—insisted that the declaration could be a "turning point for a new phase for peace."

In theory the next step would be to negotiate a treaty, but that, of course, would trigger all the difficulties already mentioned. Nevertheless, a declaration could act as an unofficial termination of the state of war and might prompt movement toward a treaty. At least, if the North didn't insist on the end of America's "hostile policy" as a precondition rather than objective of the talks.

It should be evident that the declaration is almost entirely symbolic. It simply recognizes the fact that the Koreas, US, and China are no longer at war. Maybe that condition won't last. Indeed, in the past peace has been disrupted by episodic violence. And the North has spent decades making more than a few blood-curdling threats, backed by threatening weapons development and deployment. Still, these days, given the squabble over Taiwan, the greater likelihood might be a Sino-American conflict.

Even so, the peninsula currently is in a state of peace and a declaration offers Washington one way to affirm that it is eager to put past "unpleasantries" behind the parties and move forward to forge a better relationship, including but not limited to denuclearization. And the other parties could, despite recent perturbations to their relationships, affirm peaceful intent toward each other.

Realistically, the declaration is a desperate attempt to get North Korea back to a negotiating table, even if not immediately the nuclear one. As such, the proposal also is an important vehicle to promote amity between Seoul and Washington. Moon's time in office is fast running out, with the election of his successor scheduled for March—and the ruling party candidate is trailing in current polls, though the race remains volatile. The latest flurry of activity is a diplomatic Hail Mary, akin to a last second maneuver to win a championship game.

The chief objection to a declaration should be that it isn't likely to achieve anything practical. Getting the four nations' government heads, foreign and defense ministers, and national security advisers to hold hands, circle a fire, and sing Kumbaya would have roughly the same effect.

However, that isn't what worries opponents. Which includes South Korean hawks, the American security establishment, and, it seems, most US Korea analysts. By declaring peace to exist, they fear, crazed peaceniks will appear out of the netherworld, dismantle the US-ROK alliance, send the American forces packing, and offer Kim Jong-un the keys to Seoul. Without firing a shot the Kims will have reestablished the Korean kingdom to the detriment of all.

For instance, a group of congressional members recently wrote to oppose the effort: “[T]here is no historical precedent to support the theory that the Kim regime would abide by the terms of a peace agreement.”

Yet a peace declaration would require little action. And if North Korean violations are a foregone conclusion, then why bother attempting diplomacy at all? Alas, the other options aren't good. War would be disastrous, with potential casualty counts in the millions, depending on the extent and reach of the North's nuclear arsenal. And this option will only get worse if North Korea continues to expand and improve its nukes and missiles, as seems likely.

Sanctions so far have failed to compel the North to disarm. If the DPRK can survive almost two years of essentially self-sanctions, it likely can withstand anything more imposed by Washington. Nor is there any reason to expect China to risk destabilizing the North, creating chaos and chancing reunification on American terms, to please a US administration with which it appears to be heading into its own cold war. If negotiation remains an, and, in practice, the only, option, then a peace declaration could play a positive role.

Moreover, the congressional critics contended: “An end of war declaration also poses serious risks for U.S. forces on the peninsula and the stability for the region. A premature peace treaty would provide a predicate for the DPRK to demand the dismantlement of the U.S. Forces South Korea and the U.S. withdraw its 28,500 troops from South Korea, given that their purpose is to deter aggression from the North, and call for the permanent termination of annual U.S.-ROK joint military exercises.”

However, this presumes that South Koreans and Americans would rush to grant Pyongyang's demands. Really? ROK public opinion favors the alliance and US presence and has turned increasingly skeptical toward North Korea. Even progressive South Korean presidents have consistently sought American support, and why not? Rhapsodizing about self-sufficiency and independence promotes good feelings while implementing self-sufficiency and independence costs real money. So almost everyone wants to clamber aboard Washington's defense dole.

The US foreign policy establishment also is horrified at the mere mention of proposals to withdraw even one service member from Korea. The inevitable result, the public is warned, would be the communist conquest of South Korea and probably all Northeast Asia, if not America as well. Yet who really expects a popular groundswell to suddenly transform defense relationships with Washington? The US has maintained forces in multiple countries where domestic peace unquestionably reigns.

If legislators really fear this outcome, then they must subconsciously doubt the case for America's continued presence. After all, the South has surpassed the DPRK on virtually every measure of national power and should be able to protect itself. (Why, one wonders, is every one of America's prosperous and populous allies in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East a helpless dependent, supposedly at risk of immediate defeat without a US presence, after decades of subsidies, training, armaments, and support?) America's solons protesteth too much, goes the old saying.

Interestingly, this group of Asian hawks reveal an agenda they may not have expressed to South Koreans: “Our military presence in South Korea includes Camp Humphreys, the largest overseas U.S. military base in the world, and plays an essential role in promoting regional security and

deterrence against the DPRK, Russia, and the People's Republic of China." US officials apparently imagine that Washington is authorized to use the ROK as a launching pad for wars against China and Russia over issues not directly concerning the South. Which would turn South Korea into a belligerent and open its territory to attack.

It might be worth consulting the people living there.

America's base use is ultimately controlled by Seoul. And there is little reason to believe that South Koreans, whether conservatives or liberals, are ready to turn their country into a target in a war for US interests. Especially since they know Washington will go home some day, for domestic economic and political reasons. And then the ROK will be left to alone face the wrath of old neighbors made new enemies.

Indeed, as Moon promoted the peace declaration, he announced that his government would not join the US in a diplomatic boycott of the upcoming Olympics in China. He was blunt: the ROK was "trying to maintain a harmonious relationship with China while building on a solid alliance with the United States." That is: thanks for defending us, but please don't ask us to commit ourselves! Imagine how likely he would be to join a shooting war with the PRC.

The Biden administration appears to have shared some of the objections voice by the congressional contingent, though perhaps not so fiercely. However, the administration also has sought to accommodate its ally. After all, the president promised to restore alliances and all that. So Washington apparently will at least humor Seoul, despite wishing Moon's idea would go away.

However, it appears that Kim is planning to overplay his hand and aid both ROK and American hawks. It is evident that Washington views a declaration as being of little importance; By now even Pyongyang should realize that the US government is not going to offer serious, in some ways the most serious, concessions for nothing.

Refusing to sit down to discuss such a peace declaration would deny the North an opportunity to press for other objectives, such as sanctions relief. Pyongyang would be seen as the obdurate party, refusing to discuss an action it long was thought to favor. And the DPRK would inflict another humiliation upon Moon, who has done so much to advance a softer inter-Korean policy. Politically that would likely damage his party, which would reduce the likelihood that the next Korean government would be open to any variant of "the Sunshine Policy." However, this would not be the first time that the North proved to be its own worst enemy.

The US should pursue a peace declaration, with a sweetener—lifting the travel ban while offering to establish liaison offices, with the expectation of soon upgrading them to embassies. Part of that process would be regular conversations about all issues, from denuclearization to "hostile policies" to human rights. History gives little reason for optimism, but critics have nothing better to offer. Sanctions offer no hope and war would be far worse. If diplomacy is hopeless, then buckle up and prepare to deal with North Korea as a middling nuclear power able to devastate the American homeland.

Backing Moon's gambit doesn't look so bad under those circumstances.

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