

Forbes

Laying South Korea's Kim Young-Sam To Rest: Former President Stopped Second Korean War

Doug Bandow

November 26, 2015

Former president Kim Young-sam was laid to rest in Seoul at a state funeral on Thursday. Elected to the National Assembly at age 25, he first broke with autocratic President Syngman Rhee and later was expelled from the Assembly by General turned President Park-Chung-hee, the current president's father. Kim then battled Park's successor, Chun -Doo-hwan, who was forced to hold elections in 1987.

Kim was elected five years later, completing the transition away from military rule. The troops stayed in their barracks, though his reputation suffered when the Republic of Korea was engulfed by the Asian economic crisis and his son was arrested on bribery and tax charges. But Kim's most important success overshadowed such blemishes: he may have prevented the Second Korean War.

That was no modest feat, given the position of President Bill Clinton, Secretary of Defense William Perry, and Assistant Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, the current Pentagon chief. The three were ready and willing to plunge the peninsula into another conflict, which could have been as horrific as the first one.

Early during Kim's tenure the first Korean nuclear crisis exploded. The so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea embarked on a nuclear program, centered at Yongbyon. The U.S. government decided to strike. Kim then received a phone call at dawn from Clinton. In his memoir Kim recounted that he told his counterpart that airstrikes "will immediately prompt North Korea to open fire against major South Korean cities from the border." Most at risk was Seoul, which is the country's political and cultural heart. Half of the ROK's population resides in the Seoul-Inchon area.

War was a truly mad idea, but apparently became official Washington policy with little thought. In 1993 Carter was appointed to direct a DOD task force which, reported West Point's Scott

Silverstone, “drafted a paper for the National Security Council that recommended a military attack on Yongbyon.” Carter’s colleagues reported that he “wanted military options taken very seriously.”

Carter and Perry later explained that they had “readied plans for striking at North Korea’s nuclear facilities and for mobilizing hundreds of thousands of American troops for the war that probably would have followed.” An aircraft carrier and other naval vessels were posted offshore in preparation for battle.

Yes, there were “substantial risks associated with carrying out the attack,” acknowledged Carter. He and Perry predicted “a spasmodic lashing out by North Korea’s antiquated, but large and fanatical, military across the DMZ.” The result would be an “intensity of combat” greater than any since the last Korean War. Nevertheless, they expected to limit deaths to “thousands of U.S. troops and tens of thousands of South Korean troops” due to the allies’ overwhelming military superiority. Naturally, “North Korean losses would be even higher.”

However, the two underplayed likely civilian casualties. With mass artillery dug in along the Demilitarized Zone, abundant Scud missiles available for attack, and mass armor poised only a few miles north of Seoul, the casualties and destruction could be enormous. Some analysts forecast 100,000 dead and injured in the best case. Carter opined that “we would be calling their bluff,” but that would have been an enormous gamble, especially from South Korea’s standpoint.

Nuclear radiation also would threaten. Carter and his colleagues dismissed that risk, but a later South Korean study figured that a quarter of the population within 30 miles of Yongbyon would die. Fallout would contaminate much of the peninsula and reach both China and Japan, which would leave neither in a pleasant mood.

Perhaps most extraordinary was the Clinton administration planning for war in and around the ROK without involving Seoul. Kim related that he argued with Clinton for a half hour, insisting that “there would be no inter-Korean war while I was president” and that he would not move “even a single soldier” to back the administration’s plans.

Clinton relented, but only temporarily. Former President Jimmy Carter then visited the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, transmitting Kim Il-sung’s offer to negotiate. The Clinton administration was horrified. One State Department official related to Leon Sigal of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project: “The shocking thing about the Carter visit wasn’t that people were disappointed that someone was going. It was that when he got the freeze, people here were crestfallen.” The Clinton administration wanted war.

Whether Ashton Carter wanted it he has never said. But he continued to propose war against the DPRK. “Diplomacy with North Korea must have a coercive dimension, so economic strangulation and use of military force must be credibly on the table,” he wrote in 2003. He said he wanted to use force only after diplomacy failed, but it is evident that Pyongyang has no

interest in negotiating away its nukes. And why would it, with persistent proposals for war emanating from the capital of a nation which routinely bombs, invades, and occupies other nations, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Islamic State, Libya, and Yugoslavia?

In 2002 Carter and Perry coauthored an article for the *Washington Post* again calling for war. Negotiation had precluded the need for military means in 1994, they explained, but the revelation that the North had an enriched uranium program changed everything. “Today, just as in 1994, a conventional war would be incredibly dangerous, but not as dangerous as allowing North Korea to proceed with this new program.” Thus, they concluded, “As in 1994, North Korea now needs to proceed with the understanding that the United States would not tolerate a North Korean program to build nuclear weapons.” At least this time they suggested exploring options with allies, though they called on the Bush administration “to remove the nuclear threat even if it means war.”

Four years later the two were at it again. This time they were worried about the North’s planned missile test. They wrote: “if North Korea persists in its launch preparations, the United States should immediately make clear its intention to strike and destroy the North Korean Taepodong missile before it can be launched.” Admittedly, Seoul would not support such an attack. So Washington “should accordingly make clear to the North that the South will play no role in the attack.” Moreover, the U.S. should tell the paranoid rulers in Pyongyang that “the strike, if mounted, would not be an attack on the entire country, or even its military,” but just on one missile. If the DPRK reacted in disbelief and launched an attack, no worries: the U.S. could bolster its forces so that “if North Korea opted for such a suicidal course, these extra forces would make its defeat swifter and less costly in lives.” No doubt the latter made South Koreans sleep better. The Bush administration did not take their advice, perhaps because it thought two wars, Afghanistan and Iraq, were enough at the time.

It wasn’t just Carter and Perry promoting war. Numerous commentators, analysts, and retired military officers made similar proposals over the years. But Carter and Perry held senior government positions. In 2009 Philip Zelikow, formerly of the Bush State Department, made a similar argument: “the United States should not accept Pyongyang’s development of long-range missiles systems, which can be paired with an admitted nuclear weapons arsenal, as still another *fait accompli*.” If the DPRK refused to drop its latest planned missile test, the U.S. should take out the missile on its launch pad. Relying on deterrence instead would be a “gamble.”

Obviously, it is undesirable for Pyongyang to possess nuclear weapons or missiles (or weapons of any other kind). However, while the North’s Kim dynasty is brutal, unpredictable, and infuriating, it gives no evidence of being suicidal. Which means it, too, desires to preserve the peace. That should be the number one objective on the peninsula given the costs of a Korean War rerun. In a perfect world one might dream of regime change, reunification, *détente*, and reform. None of that will happen, however, at least at reasonable cost, if the two Koreas are engulfed in war.

Which the late President Kim well understood.

One problem with well-reasoned military proposals counting on the North's rational evaluation of the limited nature of America's strikes as well as Washington's calm assurances is that Pyongyang would be extremely foolish to rely on them. After all, the U.S. has routinely imposed regime change, even in Libya after making a nuclear/missile agreement. And the North long has been on Washington's evil list. North Korea's Kims may be paranoid, but in this case the paranoids have important and powerful enemies.

Those who know best doubt Pyongyang's forbearance. A top DPRK defector, Cho Myung-chul said the military decided after reviewing the (first) Gulf War: "If we're in a war, we'll use everything. And if there's a war, we should attack first, to take the initiative." He figured there was an 80 percent chance Pyongyang would so respond to an attack on Yongbyon. Gen. Gary Luck, former U.S. commander in Korea, opined: "If we pull an Osirak, they will be coming south." William Taylor, who taught at West Point before joining the Center for Strategic and International Studies, predicted that the North would "respond with everything it has" if attacked.

The second problem is that the DPRK may well choose a limited military option commensurate with the U.S. attack, while threatening escalation. An hour long bombardment of Seoul, for instance, accompanied by the lament that while the North obviously would prefer to believe that the ROK was unconnected with the assault, the latter was allied with America, hosted nearly 30,000 U.S. troops, and provided base access for many more. However, there would be no more shooting if Seoul expelled American forces. What then? It isn't clear whether the South Korean public would be angrier with North Korea or the U.S.

Even if America ends up "winning" whatever follows, the cost would be hideous, especially for the ROK, which surely deserves some say in any plan to ignite the peninsula. U.S. proposals for war are especially foolish since North Korean threats against the South as well as Japan are not threats against America, or even U.S. vital interests. Indeed, Washington is of interest to the DPRK mostly because the former has intruded in a struggle between the two Koreas. If American forces disappeared so would the North's concern about the U.S. Given the South's extraordinary advantages—40 times the GDP, twice the population, a vast technological edge, much stronger international support—there's no reason for Washington to stay, let alone plot new wars.

Kim was political hero, someone who fought long and hard for democracy. He also may have been the crucial transition figure, the more conservative dissident acceptable to the military while preparing the way for the election of more leftish candidates such as Kim Dae-jung.

But Kim Young-sam's most important legacy probably was preserving peace on the Korean peninsula. When irresponsible American officials unilaterally prepared to risk a military sequel

no one should ever endure, he said no. Thousands, at least, and perhaps many more South Koreans and Americans have him to thank for their lives. Kim Young-sam, rest in peace.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.