

Korea: “Tear the DMZ Down Now!”

On the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, June 24, 2020

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Exactly seventy years ago, the Korean People’s Army crossed over from up there and set out “to invade”, or (as those in the North thought) to liberate, the southern part of Korea. The division into North and South was an entirely artificial one, a product of the geopolitical struggles between the United States and the Soviet Union that emerged as the consensus on the need for a new international approach to governance that had powered the struggle against Fascism faded into the background. The United States and the Soviet Union had worked together as allies against the ruthless Fascist push to destroy wide swaths of humanity in the pursuit of profit and against an agenda of eugenics that assumed much of humanity had no rights at all, not even the right to exist.

This invasion of the South was not the start of the conflict, but it transformed it. Getting the historical and cultural significance of what happened seventy years ago right is critical to the future of the United States and above all, to the continued role of the United States in East Asia.

As an American who was trained as an Asia expert and has spent a career trying to understand Asia, and to make a concrete contribution to the future of Asia, this question of what the role of the United States has been, and what it can be, is critical. Although it is clear that there are numerous examples of Americans, and of American institutions, that have made positive contributions in Korea to the lives of the people, those efforts were mixed together with other, far less benign, activities.

As the United States turns back to extreme isolationism, as racist and anti-Asian rhetoric spills out from the corporate media in the United States, as we see the commitment in the

United States to Korea increasingly conditional on the sales of weapons, the hyping of a China threat and a North Korea threat, the greatest danger is that everything that the United States did of value will be buried in a wave of anti-American sentiment, some of it with justification. We can already see that wave coming.

But the response cannot be to embrace the American flag and try to defend the indefensible. If we Americans do that, we will no longer have any positive role in East Asia, and I fear we will no longer have any role in the world either. Our only choice is to condemn the racist and destructive efforts to blame America's culture of decadence and corruption on East Asia and to go forward with a completely new vision for America's role in Asia, and in the world, that makes a clean break from the destructive habit of promoting conflict, competition, containment and consumption. We can, we must, embrace a vision for the future based on cooperation, coexistence, climate science and cultural exchange.

Let us go back to the moment on June 25, 1950 when the Korean People's Army swept down through Kaeseong towards Seoul, through Chuncheon to Hongcheon and through Gangneung towards Pohang. It was a tremendous shift in the nature of society. Family members would not be able to see each other again, millions would die in a war which produced one of the highest percentages of civilian deaths in history. Nothing would be normal again. As we today anxiously await a return to "normal," a return to an environment in which we can work as we did before, travel as we did before, we cannot help thinking about that terrible transformation of Korea seventy years ago.

But the invasion was most certainly not the start of the conflict. The uprising against the administration of Rhee Syngman in the south that started in Jeju on April 3, 1948 would leave tens of thousands dead. It was, in effect, a war. So also conflicts between Christian and socialist groups in Pyongyang were equally catastrophic and tragic in the years before 1950. The conflict was a continuation of the battle against colonialism and imperialism that had been going on for decades beneath the surface in Korea, and in China, in Vietnam and even in Japan itself.

The nature of the political and cultural struggle in Asia started to shift even before June 25. The collapse of the Chinese economy in 1948 and the collapse of the *Guomindang* (Republican Party) of China altered the political landscape. When Mao Zedong made his declaration of the People's Republic of China on October 3, 1949, the United States was pushed by domestic factions to move away from the anti-fascism alliance with the Soviet Union, and the efforts to avoid taking a stand against the Chinese Communist Party. Pro-business groups in the United States campaigned for close affiliation with the British Empire, for the United States to take advantage of the opportunities for power and financial advantage to be gained from accepting the mantle of a decayed London-based global system. The battle against fascism, the battle against eugenics and racism was buried in a cynical campaign of "Who lost China?" That campaign was designed to remove all sense of complexity about the political and economic situation and to make the United States the bastion for an anti-communist global campaign. It was a tragic choice that was made in Washington D.C.

The United Nations was not able to realize its sacred mission as an international organization, promoting internationalism, and the gates were opened for a treacherous form of globalism which would lead the United States in a dangerous direction. That is not all. The dream of establishing a culturally and politically open Korea, a unified Korea freed from the

shackles of colonialism that had been held up by the Shanghai provisional government under Kim Gu, and also by other Korean groups across Asia, was shunted aside. Voices of reason and cooperation in the United States were silenced through a campaign that suppressed all so-called “leftist” discourse in policy.

The Senate Internal Security Subcommittee was formed in 1950 in the United States and set out to destroy thoughtful Americans who tried to cooperate with the Chinese Communist Party in any way in the pursuit of peace. Most notable was the attack on the thoughtful and insightful Chinese scholar Owen Lattimore for his promotion of the investigation of the truth. That campaign made cooperation impossible and permanently altered the role of the United States in Korea, and in East Asia. The battle against fascism, against colonialism, against racism which had been supported by many thoughtful Americans was buried.

Where do we stand today, seventy years later? The United States still has many troops here in Korea and the Korean Peninsula is still divided. The political establishment in Washington D.C. and in Seoul assumes that somehow the United States must have troops in South Korea forever. There is no vision, at all, for when American troops will come home, or how Koreans will be brought together again.

But the United States constitution says nothing about the United States stationing the military abroad for seventy years. When President Donald Trump says that American troops will be withdrawn unless the Republic of Korea coughs up an enormous amount of money, he is representing cynical financial interests who want to squeeze more out of Koreans. But he is also appealing to a profound truth: the United States is not supposed to have troops in Korea forever and a military alliance is something that requires a state of war and should not be the driving force in a relationship between two nations. Cooperation in education, science, culture, cooperation in understanding the true threats of our age and responding to them must be the true goal of our relationship.

As an independent candidate for president of the United States, I would like to put forth a new vision today for what the United States relationship with Korea will be from this day forward, from the 70th anniversary of the start of the Korean War.

We will promote cooperation between Koreans and Americans to respond to the true security challenges of the 21st century. The development of nuclear weapons by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is not anywhere near the top of that list and the question of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula cannot be solved until the United States itself completely commits itself to the principles of the nonproliferation treaty and sets a plan for the United States to quickly get rid of all the dangerous nuclear weapons that remain in our country.

Cooperation between Americans and Koreans will not be limited to South Koreans. Americans should work with all thoughtful, brave and peace-loving Koreans, whether they be in South Korea, North Korea, China, Japan, Russia or the United States itself, to pursue an inspiring vision for what can be realized on the peninsula.

Security will be a critical part of that project. But we will have to redefine security.

Security must be a global response to the four horsemen of the apocalypse. That response must be along the lines of the battle against Fascism of the 1930s and 1940s, and not the tragic division of the Korean Peninsula in the 1950s. That tragic division must end, and it

must end now! It must end today!

What are the four horsemen of the apocalypse? Well, at this point, the term “apocalypse” is no longer hyperbole. The apocalypse is no longer for fundamentalists anymore. “Halleluiaah! I believe!”

The first horseman of the apocalypse is the collapse of the climate, the death of the oceans, the spread of deserts and horrific destruction of biodiversity brought on by the thoughtless pursuit of a consumption and growth economy.

The second horseman of the apocalypse is the radical concentration of wealth in the hands of a few billionaires who plot now to completely control finance and currency through their supercomputer networks and to create a human-free economy for their own profit and amusement.

The third horseman of the apocalypse is the rapid evolution of technology that is rendering humans as passive animals that have lost all agency and are incapable of meaningful political action. This transformation is pushed forward by the promotion of artificial intelligence and automation in cynical effort to increase profits for the few while dumbing down citizens through the promotion of a culture of consumption.

The fourth horseman of the apocalypse is the extreme militarization of the economy, often out of sight for citizens, which has set off an unlimited global arms race on land, on the oceans, and now even in space that could easily be the end of humanity.

These horrific developments must be the focus of an international effort to create a sustainable future for our children and that effort must be at the center of any cooperation between the United States and Korea. To put it more sharply, if cooperation with Korea is not directly related to a concrete and immediate response to those four horsemen of the apocalypse, then that cooperation should stop. We do not have the funds, the manpower, or the time to pursue projects that are unrelated to the central imperative of saving humanity.

Finally, the unification of the Korean Peninsula offers us a tremendous opportunity, one that comes only once in 500 years, an opportunity for Koreans to lay the foundations for a nation that will not only offer inspiration for its citizens, but a new hope for all citizens of the Earth.

Koreans can create new institutions on a massive scale that cannot be easily done in other nations precisely because Korea is in the midst of a massive transformation. Korea can end the use of fossil fuels, create finance that is focused on citizens, not international investment banks and pursue an honest and brave internationalism that brings us together for true cooperation.

The frugal and modest lives of North Koreans are not something that must be quickly replaced by mindless consumption or thoughtless development. If anything, North Korea is perfectly positioned to be a nation which is 100% fossil-fuel free. North Korea can take the brave position that the minerals and the coal beneath its forests and fields shall remain there, untouched by multinational corporations because it is the people, and the ecosystem, that are far, far more valuable than money.

This tradition of sustainability, of humanism, and of moral philosophy date far back in Korea. I have had occasion to learn about Korean concepts like “*hongik*” (the spread of benefit to all members of society, or “*seonbi*” (the intellectual committed to social justice). Those

ideas will bring Koreans together, will unify Korea. It will not be the investment banks or sovereign wealth funds.

The United States, or more accurately, those in the United States who are deeply committed to peace, to freedom and to the fight against totalitarianism and against the destruction of our ecosystem, must combine forces with similar movements around the world much as we did in the 1930s and 1940s. There will be a struggle, but it must be one that is inspiring and one that is based on the pursuit of truth, based on a scientific approach to policy, and that brings back the best of the American traditions of internationalism from that time, traditions that have been buried for so long.

That means tearing down the DMZ. That means reaching out to those with the will to address real security threats, that means creating a new future for Korea, for Northeast Asia and for the world.

I cannot support the rhetoric of Donald Trump especially the racist message of “Make American Great Again.” But I will say that, with the help of all citizens of Korea, of Northeast Asia and of our precious Earth, we can work together to give hope again to the discouraged and the oppressed. In that process, I believe, we can take the first steps towards making America great for the first time.



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Featured image: At Imjingak near DMZ for 70th Anniversary speech (Source: Fear No Evil)

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