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Untangling the Spirit of *Han* on the Korean Peninsula & the Future of *Trustpolitik*

By Hugh Segal and Tina J. Park
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POLICY UPDATE

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There is something especially noteworthy in how the two Koreas climbed down from conflict to cooperation in the past week. After some forty-three hours of marathon negotiations, the Korean peninsula went from a “semi-war” state declared by the North to an unprecedented inter-Korean Joint Agreement, which not only dissolved military tensions but also paved the road for further dialogue and partnership. It also marked an important occasion when the deeply-rooted spirit of “*Han*” and politics of distrust were modestly set aside by the prospects of hope and *trustpolitik*.

“*Han*” is not only a Korean language short form for “Korea” itself, but also an ominous term reflecting a sense of oppression, resentment and hopelessness experienced by the Korean people. Stemming from a history of frequent invasions, the feeling of unresolved resentment is an important one in the Korean collective psyche, with a strong desire for meaningful apologies. The spirit of *Han* could be found on the face of a mother who lost her son in the sunken *Sewol* ferry, just as it could be found in an 85-year old South Korean man who has not seen his younger brother in the North in six decades.

It is easy for extreme politics, military drills, and the spirit of *Han* to take over the Korean peninsula very quickly. After all, the demilitarized zone remains the most heavily-armed area in the world, with soldiers armed to the teeth with latest weapons on both sides. A few shootings across the demilitarized zone, resumption of loudspeakers by the South for “truth messaging,” dispatch by the North of submarines and rocket placements, troop movements on both sides, plus the inevitable rhetoric of hostilities on both sides quickly began a new cycle of fear and paranoia. The confluence of all of this with annual training exercises by the U.S.-R.O.K. forces, on the land, in the air and at sea added a further element of unwitting threat to from the North's perspective.

There is nothing new about provocations and ultimatums from the North Korean regime, which has been negotiating on the edge for most of its survival. This sort of ramp up has happened at least a dozen times in the last four decades. There have been rhetorical excesses that raised the nuclear trigger finger and testing pulse of the North, which reduced the chances for real progress in people-to-people relations between the families on both sides of the DMZ, and generally made things worse.

The outcome from the days of tension and remarkable pragmatic negotiations are, in contrast, quite hopeful. Recognition and regret by the North expressed relative to the South Korean wounded soldiers, a stand down by the South on the loudspeaker broadcasts, resumption of plans for family reunions by early fall and an agreement for further civilian exchanges on both sides represent a positive off ramp from an expressway to conflict than we have seen for decades.

This Joint Agreement broke the vicious cycle of provocation-negotiation-concession often found in inter-Korean crises, with North Korea expressing its regret for the first time in thirteen years for its provocations, with a clear sense of by whom and for whom. More importantly, Pyongyang showed willingness to remain at the negotiating table, to find Korean solutions for Korean problems without resorting to their powerful allies, and to trust their South Korean counterparts as reasonable partners.



The crisis also underlined the North Korean angst at South Korean broadcasts by loudspeaker, the operational movement of a “semi-war” state in the North, and a visibly low support from China and Russia for North Korea’s provocations. It proved that words are mightier than swords, as the loudspeakers blasted news reports, K-pop songs and weather updates. None of this obscures the truth for the South about discrepancy in their military preparedness vis-à-vis the North – for instance, the North has seventy-seven submarines compared to thirteen submarines in the South, and Washington began to re-assess its military strategies for the Korean peninsula after this recent crisis. The fact that both Koreas are very heavily armed, with Pyongyang’s ability to dispatch many submarines quickly down south and the new R.O.K.-U.S. war plan that presumes an apprehensive take out of North Korea’s launch capacity, provide compelling reasons to remain cautious.

From the South Korean perspective, this Joint Agreement has been widely seen as a diplomatic success for President Park that plays to her foreign policy strength as she begins the second part of her term of office. President Park said the deal had been possible because of her government’s “consistent principle of dealing sternly with the North’s provocations while keeping the door open for dialogue.” It is welcome news that certainly helps her domestic approval rating in the aftermath of the recent MERS crisis. For the North Korean leader, often typified as a young, scowling and inexperienced dictator struggling to find his role with senior leadership in his regime, it was seen as a first step to and benefit from a more rational middle path.

Chief negotiators on both sides deserve credit for this deal. Kim Kwan-Jin, President Park’s national security director, brought his decades of experience and familiarity with the Ministry of Defence and remained stern in the face of North Korean pressure. South Korea’s Minister of Reunification, Hong Yong-Pyo, accompanied him, who was the brain behind President Park’s Dresden speech and *trustpolitik*. The Agreement most certainly helped to add weight to President Park’s historic speech delivered in Dresden address in March 2014, which called for reconciliation and reunification of the divided peninsula -- a “jackpot” theory for the future of two Koreas.

Pyongyang sent Hwang Pyong-So, the first in command of North Korea’s army and Kim Yang-Gun, a specialist in inter-Korean relations with over fifty years of experience in North Korea’s foreign policy. It was a meeting of highly skilled negotiators that ultimately turned the tide through dialogue and debates. It is important that the highest diplomatic, political and military leadership on both sides negotiated together. As we look forward, the duo of high-level negotiators on both sides are likely to meet again, followed by ministerial meetings and other regular political exchanges between the two Koreas.

Two constructive conclusions emerge. "Hope" is neither always naive nor unduly optimistic, and rational choices for a better economic and humanitarian mix of progress can in fact be well placed; and that Koreans ought to not only untangle the spirit of "Han" in their national consciousness in their divided peninsula but also replace it with a meaningful *trustpolitik* and reconciliation between the two Koreas.

Allies of the South, like Canada and the United States and critical fellow travellers always concerned with the North, like Russia and China, need to understand what has happened and seize the opportunity to invest in further joint initiatives between the South and the North around reconciliation. Canada and South Korea share a rich history of friendship forged on



battlefields of the Korean War and have much to gain from a closer cooperation in the realm of defence and peace-building.

The gap between the economic and social quality of life between the two Koreas remains vast with freedom from fear and from want only being a reality in the South. In the end, finding ways to dilute want and fear in the North is a challenge that will need to be faced. The Joint Agreement recently negotiated between the two Koreas, however tentative, is a step in the right direction.

► **About the Author**

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