How it Got This Way: Korea’s War, Armistice and Legacy

By Haruki Wada

The legacy of the Korean War continues to affect the people of Northeast Asia, the Asia-Pacific region and the wider world. With tensions on the Korean Peninsula continuing to flare, how this unfinished war came into being — and how it gave way to an unending armistice — deserves careful scrutiny, writes Haruki Wada.

IN AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER 1948, Seoul and Pyongyang separately declared the creation of the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, respectively. Each state claimed the entire peninsula and denounced the other as a puppet of a foreign power holding part of its territory.

Article 3 of the Republic of Korea Constitution specified that the Republic of Korea “shall consist of the Korean Peninsula and its adjacent islands.” At the opening ceremony of the RoK’s National Assembly in December, President Rhee Syngman declared that, in co-operation with the United Nations, the country would hold free elections in the North to select about 100 members to complete the assembly.

Meanwhile, Article 103 of the DPRK Constitution stated bluntly: “The capital of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is Seoul.” A month later, Prime Minister Kim II Sung announced: “The central government … will unify all the Korean people and use all its power for the rapid construction of a unified, democratic, autonomous and independent nation. We shall make every effort to realize the proposal of the Soviet government for the simultaneous withdrawal of both [American and Soviet] forces, the most urgent condition to guarantee the completion of national territory and the unification of the fatherland.”

Thus the two Korean governments shared a common — if antagonistic — goal: to unify the country and remove the other side by any means necessary. From the outset, the North called for the “completion of the national territory” (kukto wanseong). A little later, the South adopted the slogan “Advance North, unify the nation” (pukjin tongil).

On June 25, 1950, North Korea started the war by attacking the South. At the time, the RoK was not prepared to counter-attack nor did it have approval from the US government to do so. But President Rhee’s first remarks to US Ambassador John Muccio after the attack indicated he saw the conflict as an opportunity to unify Korea. According to Muccio, Rhee said “perhaps the present crisis presented the best opportunity for settling the Korean problem for once and all. He commented that American public opinion seemed to be growing stronger day by day vis-à-vis Communist aggression.”

The Korean People’s Army (KPA) occupied Seoul on June 28 and pushed RoK and American forces as far south as the Pusan Perimeter. It seemed that North Korea’s dream of unification by force would soon come true. But fierce bombing by the United States Air Force seriously damaged the KPA’s supply routes, and the US-South Korean defense line at the Nakdong River held. With the United Nations now involved, General Douglas MacArthur’s landing at Incheon led to the collapse of the KPA and its subsequent retreat from the South.

The tables had turned. RoK and UN forces, mostly US Marines, drove north across the 38th parallel as the RoK sought to unify the country by force. UN troops occupied Pyongyang, and in October were on the verge of absorbing the DPRK when the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army (CPV) crossed the Yalu River and forced UN and RoK units to retreat.

In the end, attempts by both North and South to unify a nation liberated from Japanese colonial rule by force failed, leaving a disaster. With China involved, the conflict changed from being a Korean civil war to a Sino-American war on the Korean Peninsula.
ARMISTICE TALKS BEGIN

By May 1951, it became clear the war would end in a draw. On July 10, 1951, the Korean Armistice Conference started at Kaesong. At this time, the leaders of both South and North Korea believed that a military armistice meant that all of the sacrifices Koreans had made would be for nothing. On July 16, Gen. Matthew Ridgway, who replaced the bellicose MacArthur as UN commander, tried for two hours to persuade Rhee to accept negotiations. US Ambassador Muccio filed a detailed report on the president’s response: “Thus, if Korea is ever to be united short of World War III it must be done now by military means ... Rhee insisted Koreans desired to reunite at any cost and obliterate memory of [the] 38th parallel.”

Rhee pleaded again for unification in a letter to Ridgway four days later: “[The] substance of [the] position of my government is that we cannot maintain our nation in half of our country. A divided Korea is a ruined Korea, unstable economically, politically, and militarily ... Korea must in effect either cease to be [an] independent entity or it must become all one body — all Democratic or all Communist.”

These views were likely shared by almost all Koreans, including Kim Il Sung. Taking his cue from Rhee, South Korean Gen. Paik Sun-yup stayed away from the truce talks when a military demarcation line was on the agenda. The South Korean leader preferred that the talks fail. Notwithstanding such resistance, the armistice talks made progress, but in January 1952 came to a deadlock when the UN Command demanded the adoption of a new principle of free will in the repatriation of prisoners of war to replace the old principle of forcible repatriation. In an effort to pressure the Communists into a compromise, the newly appointed UN commander, Gen. Mark Clark, in May ordered a fierce bombardment of Pyongyang. Deeply shaken by the bombing, Kim Il Sung on July 14 apparently proposed to Mao Zedong that the new position on PoWs should be accepted in order to complete the truce negotiations.

Mao’s reply the following day was adamant: “After examining this problem for two days, our comrades unanimously concluded that when the enemy is furiously bombing us, to agree to a deceitful enemy proposal would be extremely disadvantageous.” Mao asked Kim to continue the war, writing that he would contact Stalin and heed his view. It was a softened rebuke and
threat. Kim succumbed immediately, cabling Mao on July 16 that he was withdrawing his suggestion and agreeing to talk with the Chinese leader.

LAST PHASE TALKS AND RHEE’S OBJECTIONS

On March 8, 1953, Joseph Stalin died and his Soviet successors wanted an immediate end to the Korean War. Zhou Enlai, who came to Moscow to attend Stalin’s funeral, could not but agree. With the main obstacle to a truce removed, President Rhee’s objections moved to the fore.

On April 8, Rhee’s five conditions for a truce were presented to US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles: 1) reunification of Korea; 2) withdrawal of all Chinese Communist forces from Korea; 3) the disarming of North Korean forces; 4) prevention of any third country from providing arms to the Communists in North Korea; and 5) clarification of RoK sovereignty over all of Korea. These conditions would clearly make an armistice impossible. Going further, on April 22, Rhee informed the US that he was preparing to order the RoK military forces to withdraw from the UN Command if the UN made any ceasefire agreement.

Gradually a settlement was coming to take shape. Eisenhower wrote to Rhee on June 6 that the time had come to pursue Korean unification by political means, not warfare, and promised, in the interest of the RoK’s security, that the US would negotiate a mutual defense treaty. In a letter to Eisenhower on June 17, Rhee coupled appreciation for the US promise of a mutual security treaty with a warning that “if it is tied up with the armistice, its efficacy would be diminished almost to a vanishing point.” The letter foreshadowed Rhee’s bold move a few hours later. Overnight, 25,000 North Korean prisoners were released from four PoW camps in South Korea, including those at Pusan and Masan. This action terrified Washington.

But Rhee, with feigned nonchalance, gave Clark on June 23 a draft aide-memoire to be forwarded to Washington with his conditions for acceptance of an armistice. South Korea would not sign an armistice, Rhee said, but would comply with UN Command orders to implement it if the following condition was met: if an agreement for the withdrawal of Chinese forces and the unification of Korea was not reached in a political conference, the armistice would end and RoK forces, with US air and naval assistance, would attack the North.

Washington sent Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Walter Robertson to Seoul to deal with Rhee. It was a difficult task. On July 2, he finally proposed to Rhee a memorandum that included assurances that if the political conference failed, the US government would consult immediately with the RoK on “what courses of action should be taken in the light of circumstances then existing to seek the unification of Korea.” At last, Rhee’s letter to Robertson on July 9 made the critical promise the US sought: “Although we cannot sign [the] truce, we shall not obstruct it, so long as no measure or actions taken under [the] armistice are detrimental to our national survival.”

On July 27, 1953, without saying a word to each other, US Army Gen. William Harrison, representing the United Nations Command, and North Korean General Nam Il signed the armistice agreement at Panmunjom. The armistice came into effect 12 hours later. The armistice order was later signed by Gen. Clark for the UN, Kim Il Sung for North Korea and by Gen. Peng Dehuai, the commander of the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army.

The Armistice Agreement established a demilitarized zone two kilometers wide north and south of the military demarcation line, under the authority of a Military Armistice Commission. A Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission was also created.

Article IV of the armistice stipulated: “In order to insure the peaceful settlement of the Korean question, the military Commanders of both sides hereby recommend to the governments of the countries concerned on both sides that, within three (3) months after the Armistice Agreement is signed and becomes effective, a political conference of a higher level of both sides be held by representatives appointed respectively to settle through negotiation the questions of the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Korea, the peaceful settlement of the Korean question, etc.”

Article V, clause 62, stated: “This Armistice Agreement shall remain in effect until expressly superseded either by mutually acceptable amendments and additions or by provision in an appropriate agreement for a peaceful settlement at a political level between both sides.” Thus, until the political conference reached an “appropriate agreement for a peaceful settlement,” the armistice system would remain in effect.

THE FAILURE OF THE POLITICAL CONFERENCE

The preliminary meeting of the political conference opened at Panmunjom on October 26. Huang Hua, the senior Chinese delegate, led the Communist side and dominated DPRK representatives. As a result, the preliminary meetings were stalemated and indefinitely suspended in January 1954.

The foreign ministers of the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union met in Berlin on Feb. 8, 1954, and announced an agreement to invite China, the two Koreas, and other belligerents in Korea to participate in a Geneva Conference to settle hostilities. The Geneva Conference began on April 26, 1954. The next day, the two Korean governments announced their terms for unification. The RoK representative insisted that free elections be held only in the North, because UN-supervised elections had already been held in the South in May 1948, and that the DPRK be incorporated into the Republic of Korea. The US had previously rejected this stance but now immediately endorsed it. Washington had promised to back...
this position in order to get the RoK to join the Geneva Conference.

North Korean delegate Nam Il made a five-point proposal: 1) establishment of an all-Korea commission and a unified government through a peninsula-wide election; 2) enactment of an election law by representatives of the all-Korean commission and representatives of large social organizations; 3) promotion of economic exchange between the South and North; 4) withdrawal of all foreign forces within six months; and 5) no interference in the election by the United Nations, which had been a belligerent in the war and was not neutral. China and the Soviet Union championed the proposal.

Representatives of the countries that had joined the UN coalition forces, except the United States, disagreed with the RoK-US proposal and favored a Korea-wide election. On May 23, the RoK presented a revised proposal that called for Korea-wide elections under UN supervision. According to the proposal, the RoK constitution would remain in effect until revised by a unified National Assembly. Another provision said that Chinese forces should be withdrawn a month before the nationwide election, while the withdrawal of UN forces would begin before the election but would not be completed until the United Nations controlled all of Korea. North Korea, China and the Soviet Union rejected this plan. On June 15, the representatives of belligerent countries on the UN side issued a final “Declaration by the Sixteen” stating that there was no purpose to further negotiations.

Peace talks on the Korean question were now over and the armistice system became permanent. As a result, huge armies faced each other uneasily across the military demarcation line just as they had when the ceasefire started in 1953. Divided into two hostile states, the Korean Peninsula was neither at peace nor at war.

AND THEN THERE WERE TWO
Over the 60 years of the armistice system, remarkable changes occurred. China now has diplomatic relations with all 16 countries that were part of the UN forces. Meanwhile, the hidden belligerent that fought on the Communist side, the Soviet Union, established diplomatic relations with South Korea on the eve of its own demise. Therefore, for South Korea, North Korea is the last remaining enemy of the Korean War. For its part, North Korea now has diplomatic relations with 13 of the 16, all except the US, South Korea and France. If it can normalize relations with the US, and also with the invisible participant in the war on the US side, Japan, we can say that the internationalized Korean War will have ended at last. What will remain is the legacy of the civil war. Ultimately only the two Koreas can remove the military demarcation line and create a system of true peace.

Haruki Wada is Professor Emeritus, Tokyo University. This article was adapted from a presentation at the symposium “The Korean War: War, Armistice, and Peace,” organized by the Japanese Association for Promotion of Normalization of Relations with the DPRK on July 27, 2013, in Tokyo.