



PROJECT MUSE®

Introduction: A Limited Peace

Charles K. Armstrong

Journal of Korean Studies, Volume 18, Number 2, Fall 2013, pp. 177-182 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2013.0016>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/528254>

Introduction: A Limited Peace

Charles K. Armstrong

On March 7, 2013, North Korea announced to the world its intention to “completely nullify” the Korean War Armistice, in place for the previous sixty years.¹ According to the Korean Workers’ Party newspaper *Nodong Sinmun*, the Supreme Commander of the Korean People’s Army—that is, Kim Jong Un (Kim Chŏngŭn)—declared the Armistice would be nullified on March 11, the day when the United States–Republic of Korea (ROK) military exercises “Key Resolve” and “Foal Eagle” went into effect. North Korean media, which have long condemned the annual US-ROK military drills as preparation for an invasion of the North, declared the military to be on full alert and warned that war could break out at any moment. The United States, in turn, announced that it would send nuclear-capable B-52 and B-2 stealth bombers to Korea and would drop dummy munitions on an island off the Korean coast. North Korea responded with an unprecedented call for missile strikes against Guam, Hawaii, and the US mainland in the case of an American attack. At the end of March, North Korea declared that the two Koreas had entered a “state of war” and that renewed hostilities on the peninsula would “not be limited to a local war but develop into an all-out war, a nuclear war.”²

North Korea’s unilateral abrogation of the Korean War Armistice, although questionable from a legal standpoint,³ raised still further the tensions on the Korean peninsula that had been rapidly rising since North Korea detonated a nuclear device on February 12, 2013. The nuclear test, North Korea’s third since 2006, was met with international opprobrium and United Nations Security Council sanctions. North Korea condemned the UN sanctions resolution as an act of aggression and claimed its nuclear weapons were necessary to defend

Charles K. Armstrong is a professor in the Department of History at Columbia University, where he specializes in twentieth-century Korea and East Asia. His most recent book is *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950–1992* (Cornell University Press, 2013).

itself against a hostile United States. Escalating rhetoric and military posturing seemed in danger of crossing the line to all-out war between North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea [DPRK]) on one side, and the United States and South Korea on the other. The Korean War Armistice looked extremely fragile.

The confrontation of 2013 was not the first time the Armistice appeared close to collapse and hostilities on the Korean peninsula ready to break out once again. Bellicose and provocative rhetoric and displays of military strength on both sides, which occupied the world media for weeks in the spring of 2013, have been a recurrent theme in inter-Korean and US-DPRK relations over the past six decades. The Armistice often has been honored more in the breach than in its compliance; although all-out war has not returned to the peninsula since July 1953, military confrontation has never ceased. The 1953 Armistice did not end the Korean War. Rather, thanks to the Armistice, the war has been frozen in place for sixty years.

If the Armistice has been intended to “keep the peace” since 1953, it is a dangerously unstable and provisional peace, as the events of 2013 have dramatically shown. The Korean War has been called a “limited war,” meaning that the conflict was contained to the Korean peninsula and was not fought as a World War II-like “total war” between the major Cold War antagonists—the United States and the Soviet Union—mobilizing the full resources of their respective populations (although it was in this sense a “total war” for Koreans).⁴ Similarly, we can call the Armistice a limited peace. The cease-fire line of July 1953 has evolved into a demarcation between two armed camps, including over two million troops and—since the United States introduced them in 1958—nuclear weapons. To be sure, hostilities have not broken out between North and South Korea since the Armistice went into effect, but incidents have been frequent. Boundary incursions, kidnapping, and occasionally bold ventures into the other side such as the failed North Korean commando raid on the South Korean presidential palace in 1968 and the shelling of Yŏnp'yŏng Island in 2010, have been recurrent; any one of these could have been taken as a breach of the Armistice by the other side and a justification for attack.

For all the talk on all sides of the Korean conflict about maintaining, overcoming, or abrogating the Armistice, there is little discussion in the mass media or in official public discourses about the content of the Armistice itself. The Armistice is a brief document clearly intended for a short life span. The fact that it remains in place six decades after its signing is a remarkable and dismaying reflection of the intractable conflict on the Korean peninsula, and of how expedient arrangements may take on a life of their own and become impervious to change. The purpose of the Armistice, according to its preamble, is to “insure a complete cessation of hostilities and of all acts of armed force in Korea until a final peaceful settlement is achieved.”⁵ Article IV concludes the main text by declaring that “within three months after the Armistice Agreement is signed and becomes effective, a political conference of a higher level of both sides [will] 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.”⁶ A political conference was finally held nine months later in Geneva, where for good measure the question of French Indochina was added to the proceedings.⁷ The Geneva Conference on Korea accomplished nothing except to underscore the inability of the two sides in the conflict to agree on the terms of a more substantive peace. That is where we have been ever since.

This special issue of *The Journal of Korean Studies* reflects back on the enduring state of neither peace nor war that has characterized the Korean peninsula for sixty years. The first three articles focus on the geopolitical aspects of the Armistice Agreement and its aftermath. Steven Lee’s article recounts the role of the US-UN coalition in maintaining, and often dangerously violating, the Korean Armistice between the end of the war in July 1953 and the Joint Security Area crisis of August 1976. “Far from creating peace or stability,” Lee writes, the United States and its allies have “fueled and escalated the ongoing militarization of the Korean peninsula.”⁸ Avram Agov, looking from the other side of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), examines how North Korea has managed its alliances with China and the Soviet Union before and during the Korean War.⁹ Robert Barnes reveals the critical role of India in facilitating the Armistice by working with the United Nations and acting as a mediator between China and the United States.

The remaining four articles deal with representations of the Korean War and national division in the contemporary culture and memory of North and South Korea. Susie Jie Young Kim navigates the “complex temporal terrain of post-Armistice South Korean society,”¹⁰ exploring how counter-memories of war and division reside in postwar literature and cinema. Youngmin Choe focuses on the changing resonance of the DMZ in South Korean cinema of the late 1990s and early 2000s, the period of the Sunshine Policy, which—for a time at least—seemed to hold so much promise for inter-Korean reconciliation and peace. Jung Joon Lee concentrates on the medium of photography, tracing the connections between photographs of the Korean War and the collective memory of the wartime experience. Moving back across the inter-Korean boundary to the North, Martin Petersen explores the theme of undercover heroes in North Korean graphic novels set in the post-liberation period and the Korean War. In her “Reflections on the Korea War and Its Armistice,” Marilyn Young, a historian of US foreign relations and the Vietnam War, discusses the Korean War Armistice in the wider context of US actions in Asia and the world—past and present—including the American war in Indochina.

BEYOND THE ARMISTICE

Given the uneasy state of peace on the Korean peninsula it is hard to imagine the Armistice continuing on indefinitely, yet it is even harder to imagine harnessing

the political will from all sides of the conflict to agree on something to replace the Armistice. An armistice is by definition a partial resolution to a conflict, a halfway house between war and peace. Perhaps the most famous armistice of the twentieth century, the armistice that brought the fighting in World War I to a halt on November 11, 1918 (a date still celebrated in many countries as Armistice Day) was followed, in less than a year, by the Treaty of Versailles that formally ended the state of war between Germany and the Allied Powers. So far no peace treaty has ended the state of war between North Korea on the one side, and the United States and South Korea on the other, even though such a treaty is stipulated in the Armistice Agreement.¹¹ After the failure to reach agreement at the Geneva Conference in 1954, there was no significant movement toward superseding the Korean War Armistice until the late 1990s, when the two Koreas, China, and the United States met for short-lived Four-Party Talks aimed at achieving a new peace agreement. The Six-Party Talks added Russia and Japan to the negotiations on Korea beginning in April 2003. Although the Six-Party Talks were primarily aimed at ending the North Korean nuclear weapons program, the members agreed in February 2007 that the “directly related parties will negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula at an appropriate separate forum.”¹²

The Korean conflict has achieved a life span and level of complexity that the drafters of the Korean War Armistice could scarcely have imagined. Yet at its heart, the problem of the Armistice is simple: neither side has been willing to make the political accommodation necessary to move beyond a mere “cessation of hostilities” to an institutionalized regime of peace. All sides claim to have “won” the Korean War—the United States and South Korea by turning back the North Korean invasion, the North Koreans and Chinese by halting American aggression—but no one can truly claim victory, because the war is not over.¹³ If each side believes the war can only end by eliminating the other and neither is willing to concede defeat, the stalemate will continue as long as both sides remain militarily viable. Nuclear weapons (both American and North Korean) are symptoms of the Korean conflict, not its cause. This conflict can only be overcome if both sides drop pretensions to total victory and see their relationship as mutually beneficial rather than a zero-sum game. Such a new relationship, moving beyond the state of war, seemed possible (at least for inter-Korean relations) in the early 2000s. In contrast, the last five years have been a bleak and sometimes terrifying period for inter-Korean and US-DPRK relations. By Korean tradition, sixty years marks the end of one life cycle and the beginning of another. We can only hope that something similar holds true for the Korean War Armistice, that this cycle of conflict can be transformed into a cycle of peace.

NOTES

1. Sang-hun Choe, “North Korea Declares 1953 War Truce Nullified.”
2. Associated Press, “Timeline: Recent Events in North Korean Nuclear Tensions.”

3. The South Korean government pointed out that according to the terms of the cease-fire, the Armistice could not be “nullified” by any of its signatories. See Sang-hun Choe, “South Korea Disputes North’s Dismissal of Armistice.” In fact, South Korea is not a signatory to the Armistice at all, so Seoul’s legal opinion would not seem to be particularly relevant.

4. See the classic study by David Reese, *Korea: The Limited War*. Perhaps the best account of the “total war” nature of the Korean conflict for Koreans is Dong-choon Kim, *The Unending Korean War: A Social History*.

5. *Korean War Armistice Agreement*, July 27, 1953. Treaties and Other International Agreements Series #2782; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Volume 1, text of the agreement, 1.

6. *Ibid.*, 27.

7. Meeting in Berlin from January 25 to February 18, 1954, the governments of the United States, Britain, France, and the USSR agreed that “the problem of restoring peace in Indochina will also be discussed” at Geneva, in addition to the “peaceful settlement of the Korean question,” which had been the original subject of the proposed conference. *American Foreign Policy 1950–1955: Basic Documents Volumes I and II*, Department of State Publication 6446, General Foreign Policy Series 117, Washington, DC, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1957.

8. Steven Lee, “The Korean Armistice and the End of Peace,” 185.

9. Avram Agov, “North Korea’s Alliances and the Unfinished Korean War.”

10. Susie Jie Young Kim, “Korea beyond and within the Armistice,” 287.

11. The United States also fought China in the Korean War, but that state of war ended with normalization of relations between Beijing and Washington in 1978. The same holds true for South Korea and China, who normalized relations in 1992. Presumably normalizing diplomatic relations between North Korea and the United States would end their state of conflict as well.

12. “Joint Statement: Six-Party Talks on N. Korea Disarmament.”

13. No one has explored the tragedy and complexity of the Korean War more deeply and powerfully than Bruce Cumings. See his most recent work, *The Korean War: A History*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Agov, Avram. “North Korea’s Alliances and the Unfinished Korean War.” *The Journal of Korean Studies* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 225–62.

Associated Press. “Timeline: Recent Events in North Korean Nuclear Tensions.” *Global News*. April 3, 2013. <http://globalnews.ca/news/453015/timeline-recent-events-in-north-korean-nuclear-tensions>.

Choe, Sang-hun. “North Korea Declares 1953 War Truce Nullified.” *New York Times*, March 11, 2013.

———. “South Korea Disputes North’s Dismissal of Armistice.” *New York Times*, March 12, 2013.

Cumings, Bruce. *The Korean War: A History*. New York: Modern Library, 2011.

Kim, Dong-choon. *The Unending Korean War: A Social History*. Translated by Sung-ok Kim. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009 [2002].

- Kim, Susie Jie Young. "Korea beyond and within the Armistice: Division and the Multiplicities of Time in Postwar Literature and Cinema." *The Journal of Korean Studies* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 287–314.
- Korean War Armistice Agreement*, July 27, 1953. Treaties and Other International Agreements Series #2782; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).
- Lee, Steven. "The Korean Armistice and the End of Peace: The US-UN Coalition and the Dynamics of War-Making in Korea, 1953–76." *The Journal of Korean Studies* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 183–224.
- Reese, David. *Korea: The Limited War*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964.
- Washington Post*. "Joint Statement: Six-Party Talks on N. Korea Disarmament." February 13, 2007.