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The preface to Robert S. McNamara's memoir, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, quotes from T. S. Eliot's poem "Little Gidding,"

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹

The problem with US policy in Korea (as indeed with McNamara himself) is that policymakers never do know the place; they simply arrive where they started. The Korean War ended not in a peace treaty but a cease-fire agreement signed by the representatives of the UN Command, North Korea, and the People's Republic of China. South Korea did not sign it and still has not.

Unhappy with the outcome of the war and determined to constrain Chinese influence in Asia—North, East, and Southeast—and project its own, the United States set about establishing and reinforcing military bases in the area. The Americans took over the French effort in Indochina, branded China an aggressor, and blocked its entrance into the United Nations. US forces trained ROK military forces, enabled Chinese Nationalist sabotage efforts on the mainland, blocked any rapprochement between Japan and China, and encouraged the creation of a Japanese self-defense force. In short, the United States pursued a militarized policy in the region in the name of anticommunism, stability, and order. Now, sixty years later, the United States is back in the same place. Well, not

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quite, since North Korea declared the Armistice, the subject of this special issue of *The Journal of Korean Studies*, nullified on March 11, 2013.²

Now, instead of marking in a memorial way the sixtieth anniversary of the event, these articles reflect on the Armistice in history, literature, and film and enable the reader to better understand the fragility of the Armistice and to wonder how it has lasted this long. Indeed, that is the point of Steven Lee's magisterial history of the Armistice from 1953 to 1976: over time the Armistice Agreement "became more an obstacle to peace than a means of preserving it."³

Steven Lee's article, like others in this issue, corrects the received wisdom of most Americans (and American historians), whose focus is on the combative rhetoric and actions of the North Korean regime. From the moment when the United States deployed nuclear weapons in South Korea in 1958 to the 1976 near-war crisis in the Joint Security Area, peace on the peninsula has been hostage to America's larger political and strategic needs. Avram Agov's article tells a different story: the way in which North Korea, maneuvering between the PRC and the Soviet Union, was able to maintain its independence *and* receive essential aid. During the Korean War itself, however, the North Koreans were also subject to the policy goals of its supporters, who prolonged the war despite Kim Il Sung's (Kim Ilŏng) desire to negotiate its end. "This war spills American blood,"⁴ Stalin told Zhou Enlai, not so much indifferent to the spilt Korean blood as clear about his priorities. By contrast, as Robert Barnes makes clear, Nehru's persistent efforts to use the UN to end the war met with some modest success.

The role of the war, the Armistice, and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which is its geographic embodiment, has a prominent place in the South Korean imagination and collective memory, explored in the articles of Susie Jie Young Kim, Youngmin Choe, and Jung Joon Lee. For North Korea as well, the war and the American enemy remain a constant presence, as Martin Petersen shows in his article. Insofar as the Korean War is remembered in the United States (it is repeatedly remembered as forgotten), the Armistice and the DMZ play no role in America's imagination or collective memory. Most Americans think of the Armistice not as a cease-fire but as a peace treaty and, as Steven Lee emphasizes, US policymakers, who know better, insist that the Armistice contributes to the peace and stability of the peninsula and that anyhow it is a matter for the two Koreas to resolve.

In March 2013, as has been the case since 1976, the United States and South Korea conducted massive joint military exercises. This time, however, they included nuclear-capable B-52 and B-2 stealth aircraft, joint naval exercises in the East Sea, and a computer-simulated invasion and occupation of North Korea.⁵ The exercises took place in the context of the Obama administration's announced "pivot to Asia,"⁶ which has included the dispatch of a contingent of US Marines to Australia and a planned drone base there; a major US-ROK naval base on Cheju Island able to host nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers; and a missile defense system in Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea itself. The United States,

Obama told the Australian National Parliament in November 2011, “has been, and always will be, a Pacific nation,”⁷ by which he meant something more than a geographic description.

In September 1952, when President Harry S. Truman contemplated the peace talks being held in P’anmunjŏm, he worried that an Armistice would return the United States to 1945 “when we accepted the surrender of Japan and then tore up our military machine. . . . We cannot sit down now with the doors open and no military machine to protect us—we must build our military strength.”⁸ In January 2013, as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq wound down, President Obama assured the country and the world that despite a leaner military, “the United States is going to maintain our military superiority.”⁹ The Armistice, when it was finally signed in Korea, halted the war but not the ongoing militarization of US policy in Asia. For the United States, China has remained a once and future enemy, as the first of a set of revolutionary dominoes that threatened perceived US interests throughout the Pacific in the 1950s and today as an economic powerhouse and potential military rival. Some observers of the current situation, like Jeremi Suri, a professor of history and public affairs at the University of Texas, Austin, urge immediate military action. North Korea “has now become a strategic threat to America’s core national interests” and the best response would be to use a precision airstrike to demolish North Korea’s missile site. This would be purely an act of self-defense and “would save lives and maybe even preserve the uneasy peace on the Korean Peninsula.” Such an action might lead to war but “the United States and its allies would still be better off fighting a war with North Korea today, when the conflict could still be confined largely to the Korean Peninsula.”¹⁰

The conflict was confined largely to the Korean peninsula last time, with such consequences as this volume makes clear. Then the way the conflict ended, in a suspended war and a divided country, shaped the next Asian wars the United States fought, in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. In the fall of 1950, with a modesty contemporary policymakers might imitate, George F. Kennan reflected in his diary that the United States was, “in our participation on the international scene, only one of a number of contenders for the privilege of leading a national existence on a portion of the territory of the world.”¹¹ The ongoing costs to Korea of the war fought on its portion of the territory of the world are evident in these pages. The history encountered here will contribute to another possibility: not the renewal of the Armistice North Korea has rejected, but rather the opening of negotiations for a genuine peace treaty.

NOTES

1. Robert S. McNamara and Bryan VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, xviii.
2. Sang-hun Choe, “North Korea Declares 1953 War Truce Nullified.”

3. Steven Lee, "The Korean Armistice and the End of Peace," 215.
4. Avram Agov, "North Korea's Alliances and the Unfinished Korean War," 237.
5. Thom Shanker and Choe Sang-hun, "U.S. Runs Practice Sortie in South Korea"; Christine Hong and Hyun Lee, "Lurching towards War."
6. Elisabeth Bumiller, "Words and Deeds Show Focus of the American Military on Asia."
7. Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament, November 17, 2011.
8. Memorandum of Conversations at the National Security Council Meeting.
9. Peter Baker, "Military Will Remain Strong with Cuts, Obama Tells Cadets."
10. Jeremi Suri, "Bomb North Korea, Before It's Too Late."
11. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs*, 496.

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