

Keynote Speech: The Unfinished World War

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I am very pleased to host this conference together with all those who have worked towards the organization of today's event. There were many difficulties on the way to this meeting. It was difficult to persuade the people of the importance of having this discussion on the 70th anniversary of the Korean War. But I could not give up. It is not meant to be a great celebration. It is not just for academic achievement. It is because of the desperate awakening that the Koreans together with others must take in this moment as an opportunity for deep reflection on the past and also on the current historical situation.

There were also unexpected difficulties. Corona virus 19 was one of the practical obstacles that compelled us to delay the event for 3 months and also to organize it in a restricted way. But we should not and could not complain as the whole world is suffering from this pandemic. However, the greatest difficulty was the difficulty in recognizing the

historical importance and practical relevance of the events that took place in the world 70 years ago. There were reams and reams of studies, arguments, and academic conferences on the Korean War. However, this meeting of today has special significance in many ways. 70 years have passed since the Korean War. In the meantime, the world has changed a lot, and the experiences of the war are now blurred even among those who have lived through it. Moreover, this war would be largely meaningless to the generations born and raised in a reality in which nearly everything has changed in a radical way. But here is a paradox. The situation on the Korean Peninsula, at least in the realm of high politics, has not changed much for the past 70 years. We are still living under basically the same threat of war and war's alarms. There may have been changes in the languages and narratives of the great powers which compose the international environment of Korea. But their politics and geopolitical factors remain basically the same. There have been meetings, exchanges, so many joint declarations and even summit meetings between the two Koreas. But the “dynamics of adversarial duo”, as I call it once, remains firmly in place.¹ What went wrong?

¹ Ra, Jongyi, *The Discovery of the World: A Korean Perspective*, Special Lecture. University of Cambridge, Kyunghee University Press, 2008

At a ceremony commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Korean War President Moon Jae-in defined this war as "the saddest war in the history of the world," and said that efforts to end this war should now be made. This was a very timely point that he made. One thing to add about the war is that it was not only a "sad war", but also a "stupid war" and "shameful war" too. All wars may be foolish ultimately, but the Korean War was probably the most stupid of all wars, especially for the Koreans. But why is this sad and foolish war is not over even after the time span of 70 years when the world has changed nearly beyond recognition to those who lived through the tragic event? It was not that there was no effort to end the hostilities between the two Koreas and to work toward peace. . This year in particular happens also to mark the 20th anniversary of the June 15 Declaration as a result of the "historical" first summit meeting between the North and the South. Apart from this there have been numerous efforts, agreements, and declarations between the two sides. But there are still no achievements, neither visible let alone tangible. What is the problem? What would have happened if the meeting could have taken place 70 years ago instead of 20 years ago. This is not just an idle speculation. Why did it never occur to the the leaders of Korea, South or North, that they should perhaps meet and talk instead of thinking and talking only about war?

We will first look into the past in Korean peninsula first. But I have to make it very clear at the outset that it is far from my intention to criticize anybody or hold any group of people responsible for the unhappy state of things still prevailing in Korea. But we cannot improve on the present without a hard look into what happened, what has gone wrong 70 years ago. I, for one, believe that at the root of our failure to improve on the present difficulties lies the failure to right the past, however hard, however painful, it may be.

On the occasion of 60th anniversary of the Armistice in Korea, a Chinese newspaper asked me to contribute an article on Korea, specifically on why 60 years after the ceasefire, peace seemed still far away on the Korean Peninsula. I simply pointed out one thing in my writing. It was because we did not fully reflect on the War that did nothing but bring about sufferings among the Koreans whether of North or South Korea. The War never really ended in the minds of the Koreans. We never really reflected on our failures. Never did we regret and repent the War. We only blamed the other side and were even prepared to have another go at it. At the bottom of this sad realities were of course the groups who held power in both parts of Korea. And at the center of these groups, were two leaders in particular, the personalities of Syngman Rhee in the South and Kim Il-sung in the North. "This war must now be ended" is of great importance in the

current historical situation. However, there is something that should precede it, i.e. Getting the past right.

With the dissolution of the Cold War, the basic facts about the War are already known to the public. Although there may be differences in the details or interpretations, there can be no disagreement on basic historical facts. In other words, Kim Il-sung began the war with Stalin's approval and support. His goal was to unify the Korean Peninsula (國土完整) and realize socialism throughout the country. However, when the fightings ceased in the battlefield, the division of the Korean peninsula, was more firmly in place. Instead of the the 38th parallel, which is difficult to guard, there was the heavily fortified demilitarized zone in place. However, the real division of the country was in the minds of the people in both parts of the country. When the ceasefire took place, most of the combatants, both the soldiers from other countries and their governments who had sent them to Korea welcomed it. But the Koreans who were most affected by the War were glaring at each other with weapons in their hands choking with wounds and hatred. Far from the realization of socialism, which was another of war objectives of Kim Il-sung, a fierce wave of anti-communism was sweeping throughout South Korea. Syngman Rhee regime, which had been in difficulties, ridden with so many problems in almost every aspect of the country, were vastly fortified during the War

particularly in its security.² In other words, Kim Il-sung achieved the opposite of what he had planned through the devastating war. Even without referring to Max Weber, the basic ethics of political leaders lies in the ethics of responsibility (Verantwortungsethik), not the ethics of meaning (Gesinnungsethik). Nevertheless, Kim Il-Sung took no responsibility. Instead he not only kept his power but established himself as a leader who saved his country from American invasion. This has remained the same basic fact in North Korea ever since the War. The defectors from the North today are shocked to hear that the North had started the War instead of the Americans. Mostly it takes several years for them to realize the fact which is no longer any news in the rest of the world.

Although Syngman Rhee was not directly responsible for the outbreak of the war, he was ignorant of North Korea's military strength and preparations for war supported and directed by Stalin. Thus he misled the public about the basic facts of existing in the peninsular with a completely unrealistic gung-ho slogan of “marching to the North and unifying the country (北進統一)”. He was not only unable to prevent the invasion but also could not properly defend the the country and protect his own people when the War finally came. He kept the bad

² Park, J.Y, “The impacts of the Korean War on the Development and Formation of Defense System of Korea”. Ph.D. Dissertation, Gyeonggi University, College of Politicsl Science, 2013. (Translation from Korean is mine.)

news about the battles from the people thus depriving them of time and opportunity to flee from the approaching hostile forces.

Nevertheless those who had suffered all the hardships and persecution under the occupation by the hostile forces were meted out harsh treatment. Some suffered punishment or indignities under the suspicion of treachery, collaboration, etc. At the very least, Rhee should have resigned taking responsibility when the fighting finally ended for all of his failures. Nevertheless, he, too, remained in power enjoying the title of the “father of the nation”, given by some of his followers, on the claim of saving the country from the communist invasion. Naturally the War, that was a complete failure in every respect, continues to this day without any serious remorse and repentance. This was the gist of what I wrote for the Chinese media upon its request. At first Chinese balked at the idea of publishing this article. But after internal discussions and coordination which lasted for about a week or so, they decided finally to publish the text in its original form.³ It remains still beyond me why and how a plain truth appreciated by the Chinese journalists is still beyond the realm of common recognition in Korea.

How could we escape the yoke of the past while we not only do not recognize the foolish mistake we made, do not repent the wrong doings in the past but still keep on glorifying the great deeds and even

³ Ra, Jongyil, “60 Years of Paradox and Failure”, China Daily, 2013. 7.28

indulging in celebrating the “triumph”. Active engagements between the two parts of Korea are something we should celebrate not only for its pragmatic effects but also because it is a good thing in themselves. But whatever good intents and how many wonderful declarations there may be, how could all these be based on firm grounds without common understanding and recognition of the fateful mistakes we made in the past. **The War remains like an original sin in the aporiae of Korean peninsula.** In this lies the importance of the present conference which is not limited in simply illuminating the past.

President Moon Jae-in also mentioned in the course of the commemorative address quoted above that there were "countries that even enjoyed special war time economic boom" amid the tragedies of the war. This, again, was a remark much to the point. These historical facts are well known. It is only that we just have not been able to derive meaningful inferences from these facts. President Kim Dae-jung, too, briefly mentioned about this issue once. He said: 'If the other countries took advantage of our foolish war to give a boost to their own economy we have only ourselves to blame.' Almost all the important countries of the world participated in this war in one way or other. It was a world war fought on a small peninsula. Only that nobody declared war on the opposing countries except for the Koreans themselves. All of these countries had their own reasons, interests, and strategic

considerations, their losses and gains through the War. The same is true of the neutral powers too that acted as mediators or messengers between the warring nations.⁴ All of these things the participants did had to do with the pursuit of their national interests, their status and influences in world affairs. As Kim Dae-jung remarked, it would not serve any purpose for us to blame the participant states for pursuit of their own interest.

Paradoxically it was mostly the defeated countries of the last war that benefited most from the Korean War. And it was not just the so-called economic “miracles” that revived mostly bankrupt economies as unexpected and unsolicited benefits from the War. The real blessing the War brought to the defeated countries were in regaining their status and role in international relations in a way nobody including themselves could have never expected to be so soon. Both Japan and German quickly resumed their geopolitical status and role. The root of some of difficult issues Korea faces in its relations with Japan can be traced to the impact of the War. The origins of both Sanfrancisco Peace Treaty of 1952 and the so-called '55 regime could be traced to the Korean War.⁵ The rearmament of Germany, too, took place without

4 Ra, Jongyil, *The World and the Korean War*, The National Museum of History, 2012

5 Professor Chong-sil Lee replied simply “Japan” to a question by a British journalist who was the winner in the Korean War, “ He also urged on the Japanese to perform regular kowtow everyday to to Kim Il-sung and Stalin who abrought this blessing to them. *Autobiography*, Iljorak, 2020, p.313.

much resistance in a short period of time which could not have been imagined before the War in Korea. Austria overcame occupation by the victorious countries and regained its independence shortly after the War was over. Germany was reunified ultimately in 4 decades of time. While all of these countries have regained their status and role in the world, Korea still remains in the limbo of unsettled war and in the shadow of ever present danger of yet another conflagration posing threats to the world too. All these stem basically from our failure to take a full and frank account of what we did and what happened as a consequence.

In the second part of the conference, there will be discussions on what happened in the countries which took part in the War. This again is not only for academic or historical interests. As we look back to concrete positions and policies of the countries involved in the War, we will perhaps gain a better understanding of the predicament of the present world. I hope this will give us a guidance better to chart our way to peace and security for all of us.

There is yet another important contribution in this conference toward a look into another aspect of war which is usually neglected. A war is not only in the realm of so-called high politics and fightings. Wars are not only about policies, strategies and tactics of the people wielding the

power of the state. Wars are not only about the the fightings on the battlefields. There are tearful efforts on the part of ordinary people to maintain life even in the midst of slaughter and destruction and to maintain even a semblance of normal life as much as possible. John Steinbeck once referred to this aspect of the war that there are in reality two wars in any war. There are nameless people in a war apart from the presidents, prime ministers, ambassadors and generals: Common soldiers, husbands, housewives, children, fathers, mothers, friends, and relatives. In the case of the Korean War, there is a book I recommend to those who are interested in the realities of the War largely hidden from us.⁶ The book is simply a collection of the undelivered letters between the soldiers of the North Korean Army and their families left behind. In addition to this book, there have been many records of the life and death, pains, and sufferings of ordinary people in the War, in literature, biography, media, and movies. I personally give a lot of credit to our government for their works in search for the remains of the war dead of both South and North. It is a worthwhile project of giving them due recognition which long overdue. But these remains of the war dead will serve us a strong notice that we should refrain from these stupidities to which they fell victim. It is not enough for us to remain in the realm of humanitarian or humanistic

⁶ Lee, Hongwhan, Post Box 4640 of Korean People's Army, Samin, 2013(The translation is again mine.)

pursuits The recognition of the concrete predicament in which ordinary people find themselves in a war should be an occasion for a serious critique of certain aspects of the high politics. The language and logic of power can take hold of people's mind and loyalty for the time being through such words as right ideological path, national glory, etc. But it is ultimately on the large mass of common people without names that any real progress of human society depend. On this we have an age old wisdom which say that heavenly intention is reflected in the mind of thepeople. I think this is also a basic message of Tolstory's War and Peace. By the same token a “hero” or a “great leader” could be only a fool who does not even know what he is doing. This kind of things may as well deserve a better attention in any pursuit of historical or other researes on human affairs. I would recommend any who still reckons this War a glorious achievement to take a look into the second part of the programme of this conference.