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# What It Would Mean to End the Korean War

By Elizabeth A. Stanley

Ms. Stanley, a former U.S. Army intelligence officer in South Korea, wrote a book about the domestic politics of how conflicts end, including the Korean War.

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WASHINGTON — No, the Korean War still is not over. While an armistice in 1953 ended active fighting, it was never followed by a peace treaty. This is why during their recent meeting, Kim Jong-un, the leader of North Korea, and President Moon Jae-in of South Korea, in addition to jointly calling for the “complete denuclearization” of the Korean Peninsula, also pledged to formally conclude the war.

Much ambiguity remains about what exactly it would take to accomplish what Mr. Kim and Mr. Moon vowed to do, and many analysts have expressed skepticism about this diplomatic overture, pointing to a number of other supposed breakthroughs in the past that petered out. Yet this moment does seem different in at least one important respect.

The two leaders’ joint declaration last month contained another significant clause that went relatively unnoticed: “South and North Korea affirmed the principle of determining the destiny of the Korean nation on their own accord.” The statement is not entirely novel; there was another one like it in a 2000 joint declaration. But it underscores the fact that as much as rapprochement between the Koreas concerns other parties to the Korean War, like the United States and China — and, given the wider security implications, the rest of the world as well — it is a matter principally between the two of them.

This point would go without saying were it not for this war’s curious history, which again and again relegated both Koreas to the rank of extras as they were upstaged by their Cold War patrons. American government officials should remember this overlooked truth as they prepare President Trump for his own meeting with Mr. Kim in the coming weeks — and perhaps all the more because the North Korean government is making direct gestures toward the United States, as on Wednesday when it pledged to release three American prisoners.

After North Korea invaded South Korea in June 1950, it almost managed to push the United Nations Command, the multinational force defending the South, off the peninsula. By November, the U.N.C. was touching the Chinese border. By January 1951, after the dramatic intervention of Chinese forces, the Communists overtook Seoul again. Come June 1951, the battle line had mostly stabilized near the 38th parallel. Armistice negotiations began.

At that point, neither the North nor the South wanted to stop fighting — yet both were brought to the negotiating table by their respective Cold War patrons. The United States spoke for the U.N.C.; China spoke for the Communists. The two Koreas were their voiceless accessories.

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The Truman administration wanted to show resolve but also to end the war promptly in order to focus on rearming and preparing NATO for the full-on Soviet attack it expected in Europe. The Chinese and the Soviets were hoping to drag out the conflict, though without triggering World War III: As Mao put it, “negotiating while fighting” seemed like the least costly way to accomplish that goal. The Communists wanted to tie down the United States on the Korean Peninsula to buy themselves time to industrialize and build up their own defenses.

Although it had been North Korea’s idea to start the war, after that its government was mostly excluded from the Communist camp’s military and diplomatic strategizing. Archival evidence, including declassified cables between the leaders of the three Communist states, suggests that North Korea was ready to end the conflict by early 1952: The devastation caused by the fighting and a record-breaking flood had ravaged the countryside, triggering a terrible famine. But the Soviet Union and China ignored Pyongyang’s preferences because prolonging the war served their own interests.

China’s view changed after its governing coalition shifted in the summer of 1952. The new leadership group decided to focus on economic reconstruction and industrialization at home, which would require curbing the tremendous costs that China was incurring in Korea. China was ready to settle in August of that year; by then, though, it found itself entrapped by its financial dependence on the Soviet Union. It wasn’t until three weeks after Stalin’s death on March 5, 1953, that the Communist camp finally made concessions on the last major sticking point in the armistice negotiations: the terms under which prisoners of war would be repatriated.

While North Korea’s pleas to end the war had been ignored by its allies, the United States repeatedly reined in South Korea’s efforts to prolong it. The South Korean government didn’t want the conflict to stop until the reunification of the Korean Peninsula could be assured, and it staged various mass

protests against armistice talks. Its National Assembly passed several unanimous resolutions to that effect: in 1951 proposing to continue fighting for an “independent and unified country” and in April 1953 opposing any armistice that didn’t also provide for a reunified Korea.

American and Chinese negotiators had already agreed in late 1951 to keep the peninsula divided by a demilitarized zone — and so when the Americans presented the U.N.C.’s final offer to the Communists in May 1953, they did not show it first to President Syngman Rhee of South Korea, for fear of his reaction. When he found out, Mr. Rhee ordered South Korean guards to release some 25,000 North Korean prisoners who didn’t want to go home. Fighting broke out again; there were tens of thousands of new casualties; the armistice was postponed.

In the end, the armistice terms struck in July 1953 — after 575 meetings between representatives from the U.N.C. and the Communist camp — were essentially the same as those that the U.N.C. had proposed when talks began in July 1951. And although Mr. Rhee’s last-ditch gambit did win South Korea several major concessions in exchange for its agreeing to end the fighting — a mutual defense pact with the United States, long-term economic aid, American support for expanding the South Korean military — the hard truths remained.

The conflict had been fought on Korean soil. Some 5.7 million people, soldiers and civilians, were killed, wounded or went missing, and most were Korean. Yet neither North Korea nor South Korea had much weight in their respective side’s decisions about how the fighting was conducted or how it ended. Both Koreas were, in effect, pawns in their own war.

Given this historical context, the symbolism of Mr. Kim’s and Mr. Moon’s recent meeting is significant: They met in Panmunjom, South Korea, where most of all those armistice talks took place, but alone, without their powerful allies.

The Koreas are no longer devastated client states caught in their patrons’ Cold War web. Today, South Korea is a vibrant democracy and one of the world’s largest economies. North Korea may still be isolated and impoverished, but it already has amassed a significant nuclear arsenal. Their war largely unfolded beyond their control; it is time to let any peace be their own.

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