

*Leaving a Century of Trauma Behind,
Looking Forward to a Century of
Peace and Inclusive Society*

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The 19th century witnessed the spread of Western colonialism and imperialism throughout Asia and Africa like wildfire. Japan, having rapidly transformed itself into a hegemonic state by adopting advanced Western science and technology in the mid-19th century, was a power to reckon with in Asia by the end of that century. In the aftermath of emerging victorious in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) fought primarily to gain power over Korea, Japan wanted to occupy the Korean peninsula following its colonization of Taiwan.

Furthermore, Japan's imperial ambitions triggered another war, this time with the Russian Empire (1904-05), a major power with an expansionist policy towards the Far East. This war ended with Japan emerging victorious over Russia, and the Treaty of

Portsmouth was signed, mediated by US President Theodore Roosevelt. This treaty, however, provided support for Japan's expansionist policy, which led to dire consequences.

It should be noted that two months prior to the conclusion of the war, the US and Japan signed the Taft-Katsura Memorandum in which the US recognized Japan's sphere of influence in Korea and, in return, Japan acknowledged US control of the Philippines. The explicit approval and shared understanding reached between these two major maritime powers should be held partly responsible for Japan's stealthy invasion and ultimate annexation of Korea in 1910.

Ironically, Theodore Roosevelt received a Nobel Peace Prize for being instrumental in bringing the Russo-Japanese War to its conclusion. At the time, Korea was being dragged into a dark chapter of its history under Japan's brutal occupation which lasted for 36 years until the Pacific War came to an end in 1945.

Amidst Japan's brutal oppression, Korean people expressed their great yearning for independence and freedom in March 1919 in a nationwide independence movement. What is so remarkable

about this movement is that it was a non-violent active resistance against Japanese occupation of Korea based on enormous grassroots support, with an estimated 10% of the total population participating. The spirit of non-violent peace prevailed throughout the movement despite the killing of thousands of protesters by the Japanese police and army.

Moreover, the yearning of the Korean people to free themselves from the yokes of Japanese colonialism, as manifested in the March 1st Independence Movement, became a catalyst that culminated in the establishment of the Provisional Government in Shanghai in the following month.

Article 1 of the constitution of the Provisional Government embodies the spirit of the movement well: It states that Korea is a democratic republic. This was a revolutionary concept at the time.

In response to the March 1st Movement, the Japanese government seemed to make a cosmetic relaxation with its oppression of Korea for a while, but tightened its brutal control over Korean people soon as it launched an invasion into Manchuria in the 1930s. Korean people had to endure

unspeakable hardships, including being forced to change their names to Japanese names and not being allowed to use Korean language in schools. With the expansion of the theater of World War II into Asia and the Pacific, Japan increased its economic exploitation of Korea and drafted a significant number of young Koreans for its imperial army, forced labor, and sexual slavery.

With the conclusion of World War II, Korean people eagerly expected their terrible sufferings and hardships to finally come to an end, but soon found another catastrophe awaiting them in the form of a bitter civil strife and the subsequent division of the peninsula into two hostile states (1948). This division was a collision of two hegemonic powers, the United States as a maritime-capitalist power and the Soviet Union as an emerging continental communist power. And it was the primary strategy of the US to contain the Soviet Union's sphere of influence that resulted in the division of the peninsula.

Most of the key members of the Provisional Government worried that such a division would inevitably lead to a military confrontation in the peninsula. Despite their strenuous efforts to stop such a tragedy from occurring, the Korean War broke out and

it took a heavy toll of lives and wreaked havoc across the land and, most of all, left the survivors of this fratricidal war with psychological trauma.

Meanwhile, the US rushed to conclude the Treaty of San Francisco in 1951 to officially end the US-led Allied occupation of Japan while civil war was still raging in Korea. One of the primary purposes of the US was to effectively contain the emerging power of the Soviet Union and, for that very purpose, the US issued pardons to a number of the first-class war criminals who came to wield an enormous influence in post-war Japanese politics.

These major powers, whose primary goal was the pursuit of their own interests, paid scant attention to the historic trauma suffered by Koreans. Healing the trauma is a task for forward-looking politicians in the Korean peninsula.

I would like to take this occasion to reflect on the spirit and the principles behind the March 1st Independence Movement of 1919 and the Provisional Government. Let us recast them within the context of challenges facing the Korean peninsula today.

In doing so, particular attention should be paid to a paradoxical phenomenon of antagonistic symbiosis that exists between the politically vested interests of the two Koreas. Theoretically, these two power groups are supposed to be arch enemies but, in reality, these two groups ironically have contributed toward sustaining each other by keep the peninsula on edge and solidifying their own power bases by taking advantage of the constant bilateral tension. Indeed this relationship is ironic and paradoxical.

More specifically, in the Korean peninsula, one group cannot exist without the other group's seeming animosity, as attested by the fact that the dictators in the South used North Korea as a constant threat to justify their grip on power while North Korea cited potential US aggression as a pretext to keep its people on a war footing and to build nuclear arsenals.

Following are the core traits of antagonistic symbiosis as witnessed in the peninsula over the past 70 years:

First, each of these two political leaderships confronting heads on across the divided line is bound to be an exclusive, undemocratic

and totalitarian one. While trying to demonize the other, he himself becomes a demon.

Second, this antagonistic symbiosis may sound oxymoronic at first, and it might be somewhat difficult to understand how this seemingly contradictory term can readily apply to the confrontation in the peninsula. The peculiar feature of this phenomenon tends to lead to an unintended consequence which results in a relationship between two opposing groups that consequently sustain and assist each other.

Finally, this paradoxical phenomenon tends to put obstacles in various civic movements and to damage democratic development through the so-called criminalization labelling tactics. The recent history of the Republic of Korea shows numerous instances in which civic movements intended to improve human and labor rights as well as the effort to reduce the gap between the haves and have-nots have all been classified and disparaged by the government as being subversive movements with a hidden leftist agenda.

A recent candlelight civil revolution in South Korea removed a

corrupt and despotic regime from power through peaceful and non-violent means, and spontaneous participation of citizens illustrated that netroots power can change the course of history by dealing a serious blow to the status quo that has framed the Korean peninsula over the past seven decades. The same spirit and passion witnessed in the revolution has also enabled the newly elected government of President Moon to put in motion the new peace process with North Korea.

In that vein, we need to reflect upon the core traits of this revolution which will put Korea on the path of becoming a peacemaker in the East Asian region and, at the same time, of becoming a more inclusive and democratic society.

The candlelight civil revolution and the regime change it brought about a year ago is a historical feat that all South Koreans can be proud of. In just one year, we have witnessed dramatic changes in our political culture and practices as well as an epoch-making transformation in the South-North Korean relations.

This revolution is viewed as an ongoing process, prompted by the netroots desiring change. It is an independent and spontaneous

movement, healing the Korean people's long-festered historic trauma. The movement may trace its origin back to the March 1st Movement.

The candlelight revolution of last year was also a festival carried out in an orderly and socially inclusive fashion. Millions of citizens volunteered to participate in the movement, irrespective of their economic class, age, region, or gender. Here, collective intellect and joy provided a meaningful healing experience to every participant.

Finally, the media outlets the world over gave their blessings to this revolution because a mature democratic culture was displayed through it, which even advanced Western nations would envy. The revolution was an outburst of the netroots aiming at changing unjust and unfair practices foisted upon them by the illegitimate power elite and taking the initiative to heal their historic traumas by themselves. Each morning after a mass demonstration, the public square in the center of Seoul that was the venue for the demonstration was completely free of garbage because the demonstrators cleaned up after themselves.

The wall of division in the Korean peninsula seemed to have started to crack following the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang last February. The Korean peninsula has been a theater where major maritime and continental powers have been fighting for a century with the two Koreas as victims. Even today, the Republic of Korea is stuck in a power struggle between the US and China over the installation of THAAD battery. Just a few months ago, exchanged threats and verbal abuses between the North Korean leader and the US President made people around the world fear that these actions may prompt a nuclear war.

Amid such chaos and instability, the current South Korean government took a bold peace initiative to contain the uncertainty and impending crisis surrounding the Korean peninsula. And the speed with which events unfolded caught the whole world by surprise.

If the upcoming summit meeting between President Trump and the North Korean leader Kim Jung-un builds upon the shared understanding reached at the North-South Korean summit a few weeks ago, we can all live a life free of nuclear threats. We still have a long way to go to achieve that goal, however. The

continental and maritime powers are still jockeying for position of strength around the Korean peninsula, and trade conflicts might arise as another serious problem.

The major contradiction in East Asia is the tension between the US and China; the one between China and Japan would be a minor one, and that between North and South Korea a much lesser one. However, one precious lesson we learned lately is that if small countries such as North and South Korea can unite in solid collective commitment and pursue the path of peace and co-prosperity, they can serve as a catalyst for solving inherent contradictions and intra-regional conflicts. If the upcoming summit between the US and North Korea can pave the way forward of regional peace, stability, co-prosperity, and cooperation, the Korean peninsula might find itself fit for a confederation system (one nation and two states) and significantly contribute toward settling regional conflicts in Asia and eventually toward world peace. In other words, if North and South Korea were to agree to a confederation regime, a unified Korea could work as a permanent neutral state that reduces regional and global tensions.

Let me finish this lecture by citing a few verses of the poem titled “The Lamp of the East” by R. Tagore who was the first non-European poet to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. In this short poem dedicated to the brave Korean people after hearing about the non-violent nature of the March 1st Movement, Tagore extolled Korea as his motherland in heart. The following short poem reflects my own burning desire for the future of a unified Korea as peacemaker.

The Lamp of the East

In the golden age of Asia

Korea was one of its lamp bearers

And that lamp is waiting to be lighted once again

For the illumination in the East

**Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high*

Where knowledge is free

*Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by
narrow domestic walls*

Where words come out from the depth of truth

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection

*Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the
dreary desert sand of dead habit*

*Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening
thought and action*

*Into that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake.**

*(The verses between the asterisks are added later and can be
found in Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali 35.)*