

Moon Jae-in Suggests Ending the Korean War; Pyongyang Agrees, but Says It's an Unfavourable Time

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In September 2021, the President of the ROK visited the USA once again to participate in the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, where he made a speech separately addressing the [issue of peace](#) on the Korean Peninsula. The South Korean President speaking at the UN had previously proposed to declare an end to the Korean War, in 2018 and 2020. He added specifics, indicating that the ROK, the DPRK, the USA and China should participate in the process.

In addition, **Moon Jae-in** suggested resuming as soon as possible the program of meetings between separated families of the South and the North, and developing inter-Korean cooperation in the fields of health care and disaster control. However, he made no mention of the North's recent missile launches, remaining cautious about resuming dialogue with Pyongyang.

On September 22, Moon Jae-in re-emphasized the need to formally end the Korean War during a [joint ceremony](#) to hand over military remains in Hawaii.

The US Department of Defense immediately noted that “we continue to seek engagement with the DPRK to address a variety of issues, and we are open to discussing the possibility of an [end of war declaration](#).” At the same time, the Department of Defense spokesman, John Kirby, said the goal is still the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

The Minister of Unification, **Lee In-young**, also said that formally ending the Korean War could serve as a valuable and cost-effective measure to demonstrate the absence of hostility and the [resumption of nuclear negotiations](#) with North Korea.

The conservative and main opposition People Power Party has criticized Moon's proposal,

saying peace cannot be achieved through a declaration. As former North Korean diplomat and current lawmaker Tae Yong-ho has stressed, a declaration of an end to the war should only be considered after North Korea takes a meaningful step toward denuclearization. Meanwhile, the North continues to launch missiles and has reportedly begun operating its nuclear facilities in Yongbyon. In this situation, “a declaration of cessation of war would only lead North Korea to incorrectly believe that it could see the withdrawal of US troops from the Korean Peninsula.” Involving China in a quadrilateral declaration of cessation of war is also unlikely, given the intertwined rivalry between Washington and Beijing.

Much more interesting is the North Korean response. On September 23, **Vice Foreign Minister Lee Tae-ho** noted that the declaration of the war’s end is a political declaration officially proclaiming the end of the armistice on the Korean Peninsula, which has lasted for a long time so far. In this sense, it has symbolic value, but so far, the adoption of a declaration ending the war is “premature and cannot resolve existing differences.” Lee noted a range of US military preparations aimed at the DPRK, including lifting missile restrictions on the ROK or the Minuteman III ICBM launches in February and August of this year. And he concluded from this that “there is no guarantee that an end-of-war declaration, which is only a piece of paper, will lead to the abandonment of hostility toward us when the situation on the Korean Peninsula is fraught with explosion.” In such a situation, the assurance of an end to the war “will not help stabilize the situation on the Korean Peninsula and can be used as a cover for [US hostile policies](#)”.

A few hours after that, **Kim Yo-jong**, vice department director of the Central Committee of Korea’s Workers’ Party, issued a slightly different press statement. “An end-of-war declaration in the sense of physically ending the long-standing unsustainable ceasefire on the Korean Peninsula and abandoning hostility towards the vis-a-vis is an interesting proposal and a good idea.” However, now is not the time to discuss this idea – “in such an environment, when double standards, bias, hostile policies, hostile words and actions against our state continue, as it is now,” such a statement will lead to group photos at most, and all the problems will remain. “Proclaiming the end of the war requires mutual respect on both sides and, above all, biased view of the other side, brutal, hostile policies and unjust double standards must be abolished.” If South Korea breaks with past tactics, “always thinking of further words and actions and not acting in a hostile manner, we would be happy to maintain a close understanding between the North and the South again and have constructive discussions on the restoration of relations and their further development.”

As Blue House Senior Presidential Secretary for Public Affairs **Park Soo-hyun** said on September 24, Seoul perceives North Korea’s positive response to Moon Jae-in’s proposal as something very important and weighty. As for the two responses from the North on the same day, Park argued that he saw [no inconsistency](#) between the statements.

Against this backdrop, Kim Yo-jong again gave “good advice to South Korea” on September 25:

“We can see that the atmosphere of different stratas of South Korea to restore the frozen inter-Korean relations and achieve peaceful stability as soon as possible is strong to the extent that it cannot be obstructed, and we have no other desire either. Therefore, there is no need for the North and the South to pick on the other side, engage in rhetoric and waste valuable time.” If South Korea wants to restore and develop inter-Korean relations, it should not judge the North’s actions as “provocations” and engage in doublethink while developing its own military might as a “necessity to

deter the North.” Therefore, the North is waiting for the South to take action “aimed at removing all sparks that fuel confrontation, including the unjust, hostile double-standard policy against the DPRK, as well as offensive rhetoric.” Only if “impartiality and respect for each other are maintained” can both the restoration of the North-South liaison office and the holding of an inter-Korean summit be discussed constructively. “The end of the war will also be proclaimed in due course.”

Kim noted that all of the above is her personal opinion and recalled that “we already gave advice last August that South Korea should make the right choice.”

On the other hand, the author uses the occasion to draw attention to some other issues. The Korean War of 1950-53 ended with an armistice, technically leaving the divided Korea in a state of war to this day. At the same time, it was signed by the DPRK, UN troops, and “Chinese volunteers.” The ROK representative refused to sign an armistice because Syngman Rhee wanted to fight until the end. As a result, the problem of finally ending the Korean War involved a series of complex legal procedures related to who should sign for whom and what.

It is clear that an agreement to end the conflict must be signed by its main parties, North Korea, South Korea, the USA, and China, but ...

To begin with, formally, it was South Korea and the UN troops that came to its aid, the vast majority of whom were Americans, who fought against North Korea. However, they were not formally fighting on their own but under the UN flag. But since the North and South are now members of the UN, the UN cannot sign a truce with any of its member countries.

The second problem concerns the involvement of China, which also took part in the war, did so not officially, but in the form of the Chinese People’s Volunteers. This has helped avoid further escalation of conflicts but is now causing problems. Including setting a precedent that such an option, originally sent for unofficial participation, is nevertheless equated with official participation.

Another problem is that South Korea did not sign the ceasefire agreement. It was then about Lee Seung-Man, but if one were to dig deeper, the declaration signed in multilateral format makes all participants equal parties and is an implicit recognition that there are two states on the Korean Peninsula after all, which is really unacceptable at least to the South, whose national security law interprets the North as an anti-state organization controlling part of the ROK territory.

The author would like to recall that when Lee Myung-bak thought of eliminating the Ministry of Unification and handing over the inter-Korean issue to the Foreign Ministry at the beginning of his administration, the project was canceled due to firm public condemnation, as such a move would recognize North Korea as an independent country rather than an illegally alienated part of the peninsula.

Again, what will be the format of the declaration? Unlike a peace treaty, which requires parliamentary approval, a declaration of cessation of war is a non-binding political statement and a more straightforward step for both Washington and Pyongyang. However, the question arises to what extent such a statement would be legally enforceable.

On the other hand, the war’s end will remove an essential status that justifies a lot. In war,

many means unacceptable in peacetime are suitable, and wartime emergencies justify a lot in domestic politics.

North Korea has repeatedly put forward proposals to end the Korean War, but it seems to the author that the goal is not so much to end the conflict with the South as to end the war with America. This is why proposals to end the war were put forward by Pyongyang during the talks with the US, as a ceasefire agreement preserves the state of war, opposed to a final solution to the issue.

However, it is essential to Pyongyang that the signed document does not turn into a piece of paper with no relevance to the actual state of affairs. That's why Kim Yo-jong's response boiled down to the phrase, "we'll come back to this issue when Seoul's policy toward Pyongyang becomes less hostile and other than words you start to move towards it." And the separation of words from deeds is an important matter because the author constantly draws attention to it: even though Moon can be taken as a supporter of dialogue according to the rhetoric, fundamental steps in this direction can be made only after the third strike of his fist on the table. But military spending and other preparations are growing in ways that conservatives have never dreamed of.

Then, even if all parties agree, it will take some time before Moon's presidential term is up, and not every Democratic candidate will be as enthusiastic about the idea. As the most leftist, Lee Jae-myung is likely to do so, but he needs to live to see the election.

Therefore, this proposal was considered and not rejected as a matter of principle but postponed until better times. And when those times come, judging by Kim Jong-un's sister's speech, it's up to Seoul to decide.

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