

Roadblocks in the Inter-Korean Railway Projects: The Armistice and the UN Command between Two Koreas

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Abstract

Even South Korea's President Roh Moo-Hyun had to obtain permission from the United Nations Command (UNC) in order to cross the dividing line between the two Koreas on his way to the summit with his counterpart Kim Jong-Il in Pyongyang. The UNC has used its authority to grant permission to cross the dividing line as a wedge in the inter-Korean Railway Projects, and the United States government, which commands the UNC, has been engaged in a tug-of-war to preserve the armistice regime and the Cold War order in Northeast Asia.

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The US government has been uncooperative on the project to connect railways and roads between North and South Korea. This was the case especially during Republican administrations, namely those of George W. Bush (2001–2008) and Donald W. Trump (2017–2020) although they are hardly the only ones. These administrations justified their stance in terms of their concern that progress in inter-Korean relations should align in pace with the North's denuclearization. However, US refusal to cooperate has a more fundamental cause rooted in the Cold War order in Northeast Asia. The essence of the matter is a tug-of-war over whether the armistice regime should be maintained, keeping the United States in its position of overwhelming supremacy, or whether inter-Korean cooperation is hastened, opening up an opportunity for a transition from the armistice regime to a regime of permanent peace.

Inter-Korean Railways and Roads

Railways and roads connecting South and North Korea would inevitably have to pass through the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The MDL and the DMZ have their basis in the Korean Armistice Agreement of July 27, 1953, signed by the commander of the UN Forces, the supreme commander of the (North) Korean People's Army, and the commanding officer of the People's Volunteer Army of China. South Korea was not a signatory because Syngman Rhee, the South Korean president at the time, opposed a ceasefire, instead advocating that South Korea unify Korea by marching northwards.



Source: APJF

The MDL, the official name of the ceasefire line, is a boundary line between South and North Korea that replaced that of the 38th parallel according to the Armistice Agreement. It spans 155 miles, from Ganghwa on the western coast to Ganseong on the eastern coast. There is no line drawn on the earth, but if you were to connect the dots of the 1,292 numbered military signposts that run from coast to coast, you would end up with the MDL. The DMZ covers two kilometers on either side to the north and south of the MDL. The Armistice Agreement created this area as a buffer zone, barring armed forces from being stationed there but, in reality, it is a heavily militarized zone, packed with soldiers and heavy weapons along the 100 or so guard posts on the South Korean side and roughly 280 on the North Korean side. Off limits to civilians, the DMZ accounts for about 0.5% of the Korean Peninsula's total area of 221,487 square kilometers. Traveling west to east from Gyodong Island at the mouths of the Ryesong and Han rivers to the village of Myeongho in Goseong on the East Sea coast, it crosses six large rivers, one plain, and two mountain ranges, encircling a total of 70 villages.

Railways and highways connecting South and North Korea, therefore, represent a peace corridor, shaking open the MDL and DMZ areas that have remained sealed up and frozen in time for 70 years under the Armistice Agreement's spell. The Sisyphean struggle to link up inter-Korean railways and roads succeeded in opening up two vital windpipes along the peninsula's midsection: the Gyeongui (Seoul-Sinuiju) Line, measuring 250 meters in width, and the Donghae (East Sea) Line, measuring 100 meters widthwise. Even if their combined 350 meters of breadth represented only 0.14% of the 250 kilometers of the MDL, they opened the possibility that the 80 million people of the Korean Peninsula could continue traveling back and forth along those narrow passages. If they did without interruption, they could transform misunderstandings into understandings and antagonism into coexistence, generating warm spring winds of peace that would melt away the icy wall of the armistice regime.

Roadblocks to Inter-Korean Passages

It was a lofty dream broken by a bleak reality, however. At the moment, the 350 meters of hopeful passages have fallen into desuetude. No trains or cars move along them; no one uses them to visit the other side of the DMZ. To understand the reason, one must heed the saying that if you cannot see the road in front of you, look back at the road you have followed.

After South and North Korea agreed on plans for making the Gyeongui and Donghae railway lines and road linkage project a reality at the first inter-Korea summit, in June 2000, this meant that they would urgently need the cooperation of the United States. For the construction to go ahead, there had to be an agreement on transferring jurisdiction over the DMZ between the UN forces and the Korean People's Army, two of the signatories to the Armistice Agreement. But Donald Rumsfeld, then Secretary of Defense for the Bush administration, was resolutely uncooperative. Using the US Forces Korea Command—that is, the UN Command—as his mouthpiece, he communicated a message of pressure to the South Korean minister of national defense, questioning the need to proceed with the inter-Korean railway and road linkage efforts at a time when there were suspicions about the North pursuing a highly enriched uranium program.

As the discussions between South Korea and the United States ran into difficulties, the inter-Korean military discussions stalled. In his memoirs "Peacemaker," former Minister of Unification Lim Dong-won recalls that the Blue House finally took action itself, insisting that it was "going to proceed with the railways and road linkage project as agreed upon by the South and North." Lim also writes that the Blue House "demanded that the United States hold general-level talks at Panmunjom without delay to take the necessary measures, while guaranteeing that the groundbreaking ceremony could take place on the agreed-upon date." After all these twists and turns, the "Agreement for Establishing the Joint Administration Areas in the East Sea and West Sea Regions and Providing Military Guarantees for the Railway and Road Effort Connecting South and North" managed to go into effect on Sept. 17, 2002—a day before the groundbreaking ceremony date agreed upon by South and North Korea.

While the United States may have backed off a bit in the face of the Blue House's resolute stance, it did not stop throwing wrenches into the works. In November 2002, efforts to remove landmines from the Gyeongui Line route in the joint administration area were in their final stages when the US demanded a mutual inspection, claiming that the North's mine-clearing activities were "questionable." After some back and forth, North Korea agreed to the inspection, providing the South with a list of the personnel who would be doing the testing. The US once again doused cold water on the activities, insisting that the UN Command's dignity could not be besmirched, and that the North had to submit its information to receive approval directly from the UN Command.

The mine clearing initiative was held up for three weeks as a result. After Seoul and Pyongyang finally managed to sort things out, the UN Command's deputy chief of staff at the time, US Air Force Lt. Gen. James Soligan—known to be one of USFK's chief hawks—openly applied pressure in a conversation with the Ministry of National Defense press corps on Nov. 28, 2002. In his remarks, he stressed the need to receive the UN Command's approval when crossing the MDL for purposes of overland tourism at Mt. Kumgang, adding that the South Korean military also had to comply with the Armistice Agreement. He also warned that inter-Korean exchange and cooperation efforts would not be able to proceed effectively if the Armistice Agreement was not observed. Soligan's stalling tactics led to the postponement of assistance to North Korea in the form of materials for the railway linkage and land-based tourism at Mt. Kumgang.

Finally, the South resolved the differences with the North by including a provision in a supplementary inter-Korean agreement stipulating that the joint administration area was part of the DMZ, and that the Armistice Agreement would have to be followed in all matters concerning transit approval and safety. That, plus a presidential election in South Korea, led

to the United States backing off a bit with its quibbling. Writing about the controversy at the time, the Hankyoreh noted, “While this may come across right now as a matter of transit over the Military Demarcation Line, it is a complex issue from a longer-term perspective that also includes matters concerning the replacement of the Armistice Agreement with a peace agreement.” In his memoir *Peacemaker*, Lim Dong-won writes, “If we were to bow to the pressure, inter-Korean relations might end up in ruins once again, and the Joint Declaration of June 15 [of 2000] might have been scrapped.”

The United States’ fixation on using the Armistice Agreement as a basis for maintaining jurisdiction over the DMZ remained unchanged even when the warm winds of peace started arriving on the peninsula around 2018, with three inter-Korean summits and the first North Korea-US summit in history. When the ninth Korea-Germany Unification Advisory Committee meeting was held in Pyeongchang on June 12–13, 2019, Gen. Robert Abrams, the commander of the USFK and UN Command, rejected the South Korean Ministry of Unification’s plan to show the German government delegation preserved Guard Post No. 829, located within the DMZ in Goseong, Gangwon Province, citing “safety” concerns. Then-South Korean Vice Minister of Unification Suh Ho went so far as to send Abrams a letter of protest, but the UN Command never explained exactly what the “safety reasons” were. No one could see, as a result, Guard Post No. 829 that is permanently preserved as a symbol of peacebuilding to commemorate the removal of all the other posts—evidence of the military confrontation in the DMZ—in the wake of the inter-Korean military agreement of Sept. 19, 2018.

In 2019, then-Minister of Unification Kim Yeon-chul made plans to visit Daeseong, the only civilian place of residence within the DMZ, while attending the Aug. 9 opening of the DMZ Peace Trail in Paju at Dorasan Station on the Gyeongui Line. The UN Command continued pouring cold water on Seoul’s efforts by barring him from traveling with members of the press, citing the “inconvenience to residents.” Does the UN Command—i.e., the USFK Command—get to decide that it “inconveniences residents” for a member of the South Korean Cabinet to visit a community where members of the South Korean public live? Even the cows there would get a good laugh out of that.

The Armistice of the Korean War and the UN Command

At issue in this controversy is the UN Command’s authority to grant or deny permission to cross the MDL and enter the DMZ—powers that are based on the Armistice Agreement. The agreement does not specify the scope or procedures for that authority, but the preamble does stipulate the agreement’s objective and validity. Its aim is to ensure “a complete cessation of hostilities and all acts of armed force in Korea until a final peaceful settlement is achieved” and its “conditions and terms are intended to be purely military in character.” With the agreement focusing on preventing war from erupting again, its drafters never envisioned a future when the South and North would be making use of the DMZ to build peace and crossing the MDL for purposes of reconciliation and cooperation.

The UN Command’s establishment was based on UN Security Council Resolution No. 84 (July 7, 1950), the first item of which states that its aim is to “furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area.” That is the premise underlying the UN Command’s authority. The official letter sent by then-South Korean President Syngman Rhee on July 14, 1950, “delegating” operational control for the South Korean military to the UN Command, also limited this measure to the “period of the continuation of the present state

of hostilities.” It therefore stands to reason that the UN Command’s authority to grant or deny permission should be limited to matters of a “military character” that are meant to prevent hostile and military actions.

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