

South Korea's Candlelight Revolution and the Future of the Korean Peninsula

By [Prof. Nak-chung Paik](#)

Asia-Pacific Research, December 05, 2018

[The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus](#) 1

December 2018

Region: [East Asia](#)

Theme: [Politics](#), [Society](#)

Opening remarks

The year 2018 has witnessed extraordinary changes in the Korean peninsula.¹ So many, in fact, that the initial amazement may have worn off a little, and discontent with the pace of change may have set in. But even a brief recapitulation of major occurrences will remind us what an amazing year it has been.

The year began with the North Korean leader **Kim Jong Un's** New Year Address in which he promised DPRK participation in the PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games and proposed a new beginning in inter-Korean relations. North Korean athletes and artists did come to the Games, along with a high-level official delegation that met with **President Moon Jae-in** and other important South Korean officials. But a truly historic breakthrough occurred at the April 27 meeting of the two leaders in Panmunjom, producing the Panmunjom Declaration, which promised a drastic improvement in North-South relations and full denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. The meeting, though filled with dramatic moments, was more business-like than the two previous inter-Korean summits (of 2000 and 2007), yet the informal and business-like atmosphere, with live television coverage of much of the event, had an even greater impact on popular consciousness in South Korea and abroad. This was presumably the case in North Korea too, though without live coverage there, viewers received only an ample broadcast of taped scenes.



Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump at the Singapore summit

The US-DPRK summit in Singapore on June 12, the first ever between the two countries, was another historic breakthrough. In their Joint Statement the two leaders promised to work for a new relationship between the hitherto hostile countries, while Chairman Kim reaffirmed his commitment to full denuclearization. I shall come back later to the meaning of the Singapore agreement, but I should note that between the first Moon-Kim meeting and the Singapore summit a second inter-Korean summit occurred in Panmunjom in May, after Trump suddenly canceled the scheduled Singapore meeting. The two Korean leaders met, quite business-like and unannounced, for an emergency consultation to get the negotiation process moving again.

While progress in US-DPRK relations has been limited—though stopping joint US-ROK military exercises must mean a lot more to the DPRK than they publicly acknowledge—unprecedented events have continued to transpire between two Koreas. The opening of the Joint Liaison Office in Kaesung in September must be counted a landmark: not only do the two Koreas now have a venue for daily official contact, but the very notion of a ‘joint’ office (located in the same building), rather than respective liaison offices of North and South, implied a commitment to a partnership evolving toward something more than mere coexistence.

President Moon’s visit to Pyongyang on September 18, 2018 for his third summit with Chairman Kim was another historic occasion. Particularly noteworthy was the fact that an ‘Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain’ was signed as an annex to the Pyongyang Declaration, which soon led to some unprecedented changes in the conflict-prone peninsula. The return of the Joint Security Area (JSA) in Panmunjom to a genuinely shared zone (i.e. without the demarcation line that Moon and Kim crossed both ways on April 27, to the huge delight of millions of Korean viewers) was not strictly unprecedented but rather a return to the status quo ante of 1976. On the other hand, the removal of guard posts and land mines within the highly militarized Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) represents a reversal of a process that began soon after the Armistice Agreement in 1953. The joint survey work in the Han and Imjin River estuary is also something entirely new under the 65-year old armistice regime. The latest news as I write is that on November 30, South Korea sent a train for the first time in a decade—actually the first ever since the Korean War, as this time it will travel beyond Kaesong all the way to Sinuiju, the city facing Dandong, China across the Yalu River, and later to a riverside station near the Russian border. The purpose is to conduct joint surveys in preparation for reconnecting the rail lines between the two Koreas.²

Image on the right: Kim Jung Un and Moon Jae-in at Mt Paektu



While in North Korea, President Moon broke precedent again when he spoke to some 150,000 Pyongyang citizens, and the two leaders went to the Paektu Mountain (a place charged with symbolic and emotional meaning for the Korean people) and enacted dramatic scenes of friendship and mutual trust. Whether Mr. Trump or any other foreign leader can actually reverse, rather than merely slow down, the momentum produced by the Pyongyang summit and its aftermaths is a subject of reflection that this paper proposes to undertake.

While awaiting future developments, including Chairman Kim’s return visit to Seoul (agreed to for this year but with possibility of postponement) and the announced but not yet definitely scheduled second meeting between Trump and Kim, I would like to raise a few points of a somewhat theoretical nature for the sake of greater intellectual clarity.

First, current changes in the peninsula cannot be adequately grasped without taking into account the crucial role of South Korea’s Candlelight Revolution. This in turn assumes that the Candlelight Revolution does indeed add up to a real revolution—a point that obviously calls for sober analysis and open-minded reflection.

Secondly, adequate consideration of the foregoing proposition would entail an understanding of what I have called Korea’s ‘division system’ and of its role as part of the reigning world-system.³

I shall then return to the current situation and suggest possible ways to further advance the changes in the peninsula and bring them to their full world-historical significance.

Candlelight demonstrations of 2016-17 and their aftermath



Downtown Seoul in Candlelight demonstration 2016

The series of candlelight demonstrations in South Korea between late October 2016 and early March 2017 have received considerable media attention outside Korea as well, and I do not intend to report on them in detail. Some 17 million people in all participated, according to the People's Action against President Park Geun-hye, a loose coalition of civic groups that managed the logistics of weekly events. At a peak point in early December more than two million people reportedly came out nationwide. The demonstrations for all their lack of organized leadership were entirely peaceful and orderly, full of festive humor and innovative actions. In the upshot President Park Geun-hye was impeached by the National Assembly in December 2016 and then removed from office by ruling of the Constitutional Court in March 2017. In the ensuing election the main opposition candidate Moon Jae-in was elected and took office in May. Whatever factors have gone into the making of the extraordinary changes in the Korean peninsula in 2018, the presence of a South Korean government espousing peace and democracy should be counted one of the most important.

The demonstrations were so extraordinary in size and tenacity and so remarkable in their peaceful, spontaneous and orderly qualities that from early on many participants in and celebrators of the events applied the term 'revolution'. Those very qualities, however, could be cited as features that diverge from a real revolution. Moreover, the removal of the incumbent president and subsequent coming into office of a new one all took place within the existing constitutional and legal framework.

Identification of the demonstrations with candlelight revolution as such would also be inadequate from quite the opposite viewpoint: that is, unless the series of demonstrations (also called *ch'otpul hangjaeng*, 'candlelight resistance movement') are perceived as only the *initial phase* of an ongoing revolution, their revolutionary impact would be limited to the launching of a new government and the ensuing reform measures. Against this view, there are also scholars who argue that, since the demonstrations themselves did not add up to a real revolution, it is up to the new government to carry out a revolution.⁴ That, however, would be a forlorn hope indeed, for if the demonstrations did not already possess a revolutionary élan, no constitutionally elected government could initiate a revolution so late in the day.

A more satisfactory approach would thus call for an examination of the precise nature of the revolutionary élan in the candlelight demonstrations and of how, if at all, that élan has been extended into the new regime and into North-South relations. Here I must first note that the interim period between the dismissal of Park Geun-hye and election of Moon Jae-in represented a special phase of its own. Moon did win handily (though not overwhelmingly) with 41% of the vote in a four-part race. But the fact that the campaign had to be conducted within the existing constitutional and legal framework severely hampered the revolutionary fervor of candlelight citizens. The laws and regulations governing the electoral process had largely been designed to limit civic participation, and Moon himself carried out a rather

defensive campaign. Dangers inherent in an electoral phase may be most dramatically seen in the May 1968 revolution in France ending in a big Gaullist victory in the snap National Assembly elections called by the government. In South Korea 2017, the presidential election had a different outcome partly because Park Geun-hye's regime lacked the strengths of De Gaulle's and the crimes and misdemeanors of her government were much more heinous. But the difference in the result also illustrates the power of the revolutionary impulse in the initial phase capable of surviving perils of the electoral phase.

But was the peaceful overthrow of the Park government a real revolution, after all? I say yes, because what the citizens accomplished was not what it appeared to be on the surface, a *reactivation* of the country's (largely democratic) 1987 constitution. Rather, it was the *activation for the first time* of the constitution as such. While South Korea's written constitutions have been more or less democratic (with the important exception of the blatantly anti-democratic ones of Park Chung-hee's Yushin rule, 1972-79, and Chun Doo-hwan's 'Fifth Republic', 1980-87), there has always operated an unwritten rule that constitutional guarantees of civil and human rights could be arbitrarily suspended in view of the exigencies of the peninsula's division and inter-Korean confrontation. I have called this a 'hidden constitution'⁵, which reached a new high of virulence under Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, at last prompting citizens to rise up to suspend, though not yet fully abrogate, that hidden constitution and punish the perpetrators. In that sense, the candlelight demonstrations accomplished, or at least initiated, "a more essential revolution that changed a country where constitutions were not observed into one where they were."⁶

The candlelight revolution thus cannot be understood apart from the particular nature of South Korea as a divided country, a component of the peninsula's division system. The same goes for subsequent developments under Moon Jae-in's not very revolutionary-looking government. Because the candlelight demonstrations ousted the reigning president and brought in a new government within the existing constitutional framework, in a way instituting real constitutional rule for the first time, Moon's 'candlelight government' had to respect the constitutional and legal constraints inherited from pre-revolutionary days. The resultant project of 'carrying on the revolution by non-revolutionary means' would ordinarily mean a cover for abandoning the revolution itself—as in fact occurred under the transitional government after the April Student Revolution of 1960.^[7] However, when combined with determined moves toward a radical transformation of the division system, the phrase could acquire a more substantive meaning. Changes in the peninsula this year, accomplished mostly through the president's executive powers and prerogatives, have been well-nigh revolutionary, and may lead to the truly revolutionary consequence of the formation of an inter-Korean commonwealth—which in its initial stage of a rather loose combination I like to call the Association of Korean States. I shall have more to say on this later.

On the domestic scene, too, attempts to eradicate the hidden constitution by bringing to justice those who under its protection indulged in corruption and flagrant abuses of power, have proceeded mostly through the executive power of prosecution, i.e., with minimum help from the National Assembly where the Free Korea Party, the old party of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, still holds more than a third of the seats and has so far blocked most reform legislation. On the economic front the government's record remains more limited, due in part to unpropitious global conditions and structural problems inherited from previous governments, but also on account of the inevitably greater reliance on legislation in this field and arguably some inexpert management by the executive branch. Moreover, because under the division system domestic and inter-Korean issues are closely intertwined,

President Moon's failure to sustain citizens' support for domestic reasons could weaken his initiatives on the inter-Korean front, while further progress in North-South relations (including economic cooperation) will no doubt help him in his political and economic endeavors at home.

Some further thoughts on revolution

To argue that the candlelight revolution is a peculiarly Korean phenomenon and owes its revolutionary nature to the peninsula's *sui generis* division system does not mean indulging in 'Korean exceptionalism'. Rather, it is an attempt to understand general principles in their concrete application to particular conditions, and in so far as those conditions are quite peculiar, the general principles might be illuminated with all the greater clarity and concreteness. In a way this corresponds to Lukács's (originally Marxian) notion of 'typicality' in literature—characters and situations far from the average becoming more truly representative of total historical reality through the artist's faithful delineation.⁸

The French Revolution of 1789 and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 shared features of foundational violence, radical transformation in political and economic relations, resort to violent and often extra-legal measures and far-reaching international repercussions, so that they have provided the textbook models of 'real revolution'. But aside from the fact that there is no transcendental law prescribing that all 'real revolutions' resemble them, the two great revolutions, as Hannah Arendt notes, failed to consolidate the aims of their leaders into a lasting political order—in contrast to an earlier one, the American Revolution of 1765 (or 1776) to 1783, which created a durable constitution and republic designed by the revolutionaries themselves.⁹

This is not the place to discuss Arendt's views in detail,¹⁰ but another notable fact regarding the textbook model is that very few revolutions on that model have succeeded since 1917. True, socialist revolutions have occurred and built durable political structures in places like China, Cuba and Vietnam, but each of them combined the character of a war of national liberation—as did in fact the American Revolution (also called the War of Independence). Then there were communist takeovers in Eastern Europe after the Second World War aided by the victorious Red Army. Except for Yugoslavia (whose communist government has also not endured), these were hardly genuine revolutions and speedily collapsed once the Soviet Union disintegrated. What they offered instead were venues for a new kind of revolution: failed ones in the cases of Hungary 1956 and Czechoslovakia 1968, a more successful transition to post-communism in Poland through the struggles of the Solidarity Union and subsequent electoral victories, and a series of peaceful anti-communist revolutions after the fall of the Soviet Union, of which the 'Velvet Revolution' of Czechoslovakia 1989 would stand out as the most impressive instance.

The twentieth century, despite the Russian and other violent revolutions and wars, must also be counted as an age when organized peaceful mass action increasingly bore fruit. Though not usually called a revolution, the non-violent anti-colonial resistance of the Indian masses (from the 1930 Salt March on) led by Gandhi accomplished profound changes in Indian national life and probably made as great an impact on human history as any 'real revolution'. In the latter half of the century one meets with numerous examples of peaceful or mostly peaceful revolutions in addition to those in Eastern Europe, e.g., Portugal 1974,

Iran 1979, the Philippines 1986, Mongolia 1990. Preceding most of them was South Korea's April 1960 Student Revolution, involving bloodshed but only because the police opened fire on peaceful demonstrators. South Korea's June 1987 mass uprising not only abolished dictatorship but, unlike the April Revolution, did not permit a full reversal of democratization, although Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye labored for one.

The Candlelight Revolution of the twenty-first century carries on this national and global tradition. Its roots in Korea's history actually go farther back, notably to the March First Independence Movement of 1919, a nationwide non-violent uprising that did not succeed in ending Japanese colonial rule but brought about larger breathing space for Koreans for nearly two decades and, outside the country, launched the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai the same year, representing a decisive break with any idea of reviving the defunct monarchy. Insofar as the March 1 Movement was literally nationwide, i.e., peninsula-wide, it enjoyed an advantage over the candlelight demonstrations, which were limited to the peninsula's southern half.

Yet the Candlelight Revolution is an unprecedented achievement in two respects. First, recollection of its historical roots—among which one must add the Kwangju Democratic Uprising of 1980 and the massive anti-Lee Myung-bak candlelight demonstrations in the first decade of the 21st century—reminds one that it was an *incremental* achievement, building on previous attempts at a peaceful revolution, especially on the success of the June 1987 Democratization Movement. I have indicated how, under the peculiar condition of the division system, the Candlelight Revolution despite its faithful adherence to the existing constitutional and legal framework could be more revolutionary than even the overturning of the military dictatorship in 1987. Nevertheless, it was the earlier achievement that made it difficult from the start to brutally suppress peaceful mass action as in the days of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, and virtually impossible when mass action on an unprecedented scale in 2016-17 came to combine such deep and widespread popular anger with exemplary orderliness and festive humor. This incremental nature would differentiate the Candlelight Revolution from those, say, of the Arab Spring, where democratic transition occurred for the first time, often resulting in return to dictatorship or extreme chaos.

Secondly, South Korea's Candlelight Revolution may have been the first instance in the world of full utilization of information technology. True, telecommunication and SNS (social network service) were important in the Arab Spring and many other instances (including South Korea's 2008 candlelight demonstrations), but with technologically advanced and highly wired people like South Koreans in 2016-17 the impact far exceeded even that in 2008. This factor, when combined with the first feature of building on an earlier civic revolution, provided an entirely new terrain for peaceful revolution.

In noting the global trend toward peaceful revolutions (or at any rate the paucity of successful 'classical' revolutions) and suggesting the Candlelight Revolution as a significant nodal point in that trend, I for one do not wish to advocate absolute pacifism. Clearly non-violence is in principle preferable to violence, and one admires the courage of those embracing non-violence at any cost. Yet, the distinction between violence and non-violence is sometimes not clear-cut, and real-world revolutions are bound to display elements of both. More importantly, we should not dismiss the debt owed to the bloodshed, voluntary or involuntary, that has helped to widen the road to peaceful revolutions. In South Korea, for instance, not only did unarmed but rock- and firebomb-throwing demonstrators play a sizable role in the June 1987 uprisings (contributing to the later success of the entirely

nonviolent Candlelight Revolution), but in May 1980 Kwangju it was the hastily formed citizens' army that drove out the murderous martial law forces and won the space for several days of utopian communal peace. The fact that not a single person was hurt or arrested in the anti-government demonstrations of 2016-17 makes the Candlelight Revolution exceptional in that regard as well, and will remain a model to strive for—but not one to be fetishized.

Toward an Association of Korean States

The character of the Candlelight Revolution entails a more than academic debate. For we also face the practical problem of adequately gauging the importance of its input into the current peace process and fully utilizing that input in order to bring the process to its intended goal.

On the face of it, North Korea's Chairman Kim Jong Un has played the most proactive role in the dramatic changes of 2018, beginning with his New Year address and including his bold pledges of complete denuclearization. President Donald Trump, too, has contributed with sizable impact and exceptional visibility. Yet whatever North Korea's confidence gained from its successful buildup of nuclear capability, or the strategic judgment on Kim's part to announce a willingness to trade that capability for security guarantees and opportunities for economic prosperity, it is doubtful that the whole process would have started at all if South Korean citizens had not risen up and produced a new government determined to reject any military solution by the United States and ready to engage Pyongyang in a common endeavor to build peace.¹¹

At any rate, as subsequent events unfolded, it has become increasingly clear that progress even in DPRK-US relations seems impossible without South Korea's proactive intervention and mediation at almost every step. Some praise President Moon's diplomatic skills in handling Trump, and I have no intention to denigrate his skills. But he can display those skills and put them to maximum use because, as the head of the 'candlelight government', he is acting from a position of strength that neither of his liberal predecessors, Kim Dae-jung nor Roh Mu-hyun, enjoyed. Kim Dae-jung at any rate possessed virtually unmatched personal diplomatic and political skills, but he came to power heading a rather shaky coalition with the conservative Kim Jong-pil, and could not in any case fall back on the argument, when dealing with foreign leaders, that as a 'candlelight president' he had no choice but to comply with the popular mandate for a peaceful peninsula.

Kim Jong Un, despite his firmer one-man grip on power, has little leverage to compel the U.S. to respond in good faith, once he has opted to renounce nuclear weapons. He can naturally refuse, and will certainly keep refusing, any unilateral denuclearization (which he never promised anyway) that the U.S. demands before it lifts sanctions to any substantial degree. As a matter of fact, the Joint Statement signed by him and Trump at the Singapore summit stipulated a radically different approach: rather than focusing on a timetable of disclosure, inspection, dismantlement, etc. premised on mutual distrust, to start from trust-building and multi-track moves toward a new US-DPRK relationship and to achieve a negotiated denuclearization on that basis.

On the American side, too, leverage for speedy settlement seems quite limited. Whether Mr. Trump realizes or not what a historic shift he signed onto in Singapore, he lacks in any case the power and clarity of purpose to implement that shift. Not only does most of American mainstream opinion, but probably the views of many of his own staff, seem to harbor

endemic mistrust of North Korea—i.e., mistrust going beyond healthy skepticism to betray an imperial dismissal of any wrongdoing on the part of the Empire¹²—which often results in outright distortion of facts even by the respectable press.¹³ No doubt mistrust of Trump adds fervor to those anti-North Korea sentiments, and while I have no intention to enter the debate on the president's personal qualities, it appears that he has done much to destroy America's traditional liberal values at home and weaken the multilateral structures abroad that the American elite labored to set up over the decades for a smoothly functioning U.S. hegemony. Indeed, what to make of Trump's relatively constructive role in the Korean peninsula within this larger picture would seem to present an intellectual challenge of its own.

On a certain view of U.S. hegemony, however, Trump's generally destructive role and his constructive moves in the particular Korean case could prove quite compatible. Multilateral mechanisms such as the United Nations, NATO, IMF, WTO, APEC and others designed to enable (and also to cover up) U.S. domination of the world either no longer meet American expectations or function to benefit only the nation's elite, thus fanning the legitimate wrath of many ordinary Americans that, however partially, Trump represents. From Korea's vantage point, the so-called Pax Americana, which helped sustain and was in turn bolstered by the peninsula's division system, hardly promised real peace for the population. Not only did Korea suffer high military tension and continuous threats of war, but ordinary Koreans north and south have had to endure severe limitations on democratic and human rights and on national autonomy.¹⁴ Thus, where American elite opinion finds in Trump's moves for rapprochement with North Korea another instance of his irresponsibility and erratic behavior, Koreans can only welcome his assault on the peninsula's status quo. Indeed, if Bruce Cumings is to be believed, the Korean War was more important than the Vietnam War in that "it was the occasion for transforming the U.S. into a country that the founding fathers would barely recognize,"¹⁵ and Trump would be displaying his irresponsibility to the full when he is helping to undo Korea's division system so essential to that transformation. Except that those mainstream critics in America who blame Trump and his misdeeds for the decline of U.S. hegemony and the shrinking benefits even to ordinary Americans of Pax Americana must be judged equally short-sighted and errant.

Trump's accomplishment—assuming he does accomplish a good deal of what he is promising—will be difficult to reverse largely because of the South Korean government and the civic power behind it. In fact, South Korea's role is likely to go beyond simple mediation in DPRK-US negotiations and increasingly serve as an essential provider of security guarantees. In contrast to complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, a difficult but in principle not an impossible task, there can be no such thing in human history as a complete security guarantee. Even in the realm of humanly possible guarantees, a peace agreement and diplomatic recognition by the United States will need to be supplemented not only with collateral guarantees by concerned foreign powers but more importantly through a closer political association of the two Koreas. For if the U.S. reverses its policy, there is no power to stop it. However, North Korea's status as the partner of U.S. ally South Korea in some inter-Korean commonwealth or confederation would give greater security than any promises made by the American government.

The idea of a commonwealth is not a hastily manufactured vision, but has been South Korea's government policy ever since the Rho Tae-woo regime in the late 1980s. It was incorporated into the inter-Korean agreement in 2000 in Article 2 of the June 15 Joint

Declaration, which found similarities between the South's proposal of a commonwealth and the North's of a "low-stage federation."¹⁶ Since even a low-stage federation or confederation could not realistically come to pass without a prior stage of two-state commonwealth, the latter should start, realistically, from a lower level of its possible forms. I have argued for '*najŭn tangye ũi yŏnhapje*' or a low-stage commonwealth, which in English I prefer to call an Association of Korean States with ASEAN or The Association of Southeast Asian Nations in mind, a far lower form of combination than the European Union.

There is an additional guarantee that such an association will have to provide. Although Pyongyang is not saying so explicitly, even full rapprochement with the U.S. will leave it with another grave threat to its stability, namely, the very presence of a more prosperous and internationally prestigious neighbor to the south. Many speculate whether North Korea will follow a variant of the Chinese or the Vietnamese model in its prospective economic reforms and opening to the outside world. To be sure, North Korean leaders surely would prefer the Chinese-Vietnamese model to the Soviet-East European model of transition in which the political power of the Communist Party as well as its socialist economic institutions were eliminated. But there exists a crucial difference between North Korea and both China and Vietnam: the latter embarked on the path of reform and opening as *unified* nations—Taiwan's cross-straits separation from China is not comparable to the national division in today's Korean peninsula—and did not have the problem of a South Korea or its equivalent on its hands. Hence, North Korea will need the 'security guarantee' of some institutionalized inter-Korean framework ensuring a mutually agreed level of stability, while pledging to move on in due course toward an agreed stage of fuller integration. Nor does the ultimate goal of this phased process need to be set as a unitary nation-state.

Progress on this road will not only be essential to full denuclearization of the peninsula—which is not to say that the *achievement* of an association amounts to a prerequisite to denuclearization—but to the implementation of the domestic agenda of the Candlelight Revolution. Without continuous progress in inter-Korean relations and a heightened degree of institutionalization of that progress, the peculiar task of 'carrying out the revolution by non-revolutionary means' will soon lose momentum, even as advance on the domestic front will be necessary for continuation of South Korea's proactive role on diplomatic and inter-Korean fronts.¹⁷

In closing, I must note that a low-level inter-Korean association is *already in the making*. Work on its construction began—or strictly speaking, restarted—with the dramatic events of 2018, particularly the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration and the opening of the Inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office on September 14. I say 'restarted' because the October 4 Declaration by Roh Mu-hyun and Kim Jong Il in 2007 was intended as 'principles of implementation of the June 15 Joint Declaration' and was followed by a flurry of inter-Korean meetings and efforts at building new organs of exchange and cooperation. Those moves were stalled when Lee Myung-bak came to power, totally stopped after the sinking of the naval ship *Cheonan* in 2010,¹⁸ and confrontation between North and South only became worse under Park Geun-hye. It was direct action by candlelight citizens that put a brake on such a deplorable and dangerous trend, and it will need continuous input by those citizens (though not necessarily in the form of mass assemblies and demonstrations) to keep the positive changes of 2018 on course and keep their unique revolution alive.

This partially explains why full denuclearization of the Korean peninsula must be arduous

and extended, yet is full of possibilities for both Korea and the world.

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Nak-chung Paik is Editor Emeritus of the South Korean literary-intellectual journal, *The Quarterly Changbi*, and Professor Emeritus of English Literature, Seoul National University

Notes

¹The present essay partially draws on my keynote speech, "[The Historical Significance and Remaining Challenges of the Candlelight Movement](#)," at the Candlelight International Forum on Plaza Democracy and Prospects of Social Change, Seoul Global Center, Seoul, Korea, 24 May 2018, and on three similar talks given subsequently at the University of Virginia (UVA Symposium on Korea, September 28), Harvard University (Korea Institute Kim Koo Forum, October 4) and the University of Chicago (Center for East Asian Studies Special Lecture, October 8).

²Actual work on reconnection is at present subject to UN sanctions. In fact, the joint survey was initially blocked by the UN Command in Korea (i.e., by the United States), but another milestone was passed when the UN Security Council on November 23, 2018 granted exemption by a unanimous vote.

³For my notion of the division system, see Paik Nak-chung, *The Division System in Crisis: Essays on Contemporary Korea*, tr. Kim Myung-hwan et al., University of California Press, 2011, especially the Foreword by Bruce Cumings and Author's Preface to the English-Language Edition; also Paik Nak-chung, "Toward Overcoming Korea's Division System through Civic Participation," *Critical Asian Studies* vol. 45 no. 2 (June 2013), 279-290.

⁴E.g., Kim Chongyŏp (Kim Jong-yup), "Toward a New Stage of the Candlelight Revolution [대한민국 촛불 혁명], *The Changbi Quarterly* [창비] 176, Summer 2017, 2-5. It must be noted, however, that the same author later somewhat revised his position, suggesting that the candlelight citizens may have had an intuitive insight into the revolutionary nature of their actions and may indeed have realized the 'utopia of revolution', i.e., the dream within revolutions of becoming a festive occurrence free of violence. (Kim Chongyŏp, *The Division System and the 1987 Regime* [대한민국 87혁명], Changbi Publishers 2017, 469.)

⁵See my "The Historical Significance and Remaining Challenges of the Candlelight Movement."

⁶Paek Nakch' ŏng (Paik Nak-chung), "Let Us Not Keep Still in the New Year, Either" [새해에 우리는 멈춰서지 않아요], *Changbi Weekly Commentary*, 28 December 2016.

⁷The phrase was used by Hŏ Chŏng, head of the transition government, to define one of his basic policy objectives in May 1960 after consultation with U.S. Ambassador Walter McConaughy.

⁸"The type, according to Marx and Engels, is not the abstract type of classical tragedy, nor the idealized universality as in Schiller, still less what Zola and post-Zola literature and literary theory made of it: the average. What characterizes the type is the convergence and intersection of all the dominant aspects of that dynamic unity through which genuine literature reflects life in a vital and contradictory unity—all the most important social, moral and spiritual contradictions of a time." Georg Lukács, "Marx and

Engels on Aesthetics," *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. & tr. A. Kahn, Merlin Press 1970, 78.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* [1963], Penguin Classics 2006, 133 et passim.

¹⁰ I wish, however, to note in passing what seems to me a serious lacuna in her reflections. When she cites—in addition to the difference in the character of preceding monarchies (146)—as a major difference between the two eighteenth century revolutions the “natural abundance” (209) of pre-revolutionary America that exempted the American Revolution from the necessity represented by the large presence of the poor (as in France and later Russia), she recognizes the contribution of the black laborer and black slavery, but nowhere notes the earlier wholesale dispossession of Native Americans’ land and resources. That violence of settler colonialism must be counted the single most important factor giving white settlers relative immunity from Arendt’s ‘necessity’.

¹¹ As Sŏ Chaechŏng (J. J. Suh) persuasively argues in his on-line column, “[The Warmth of Candlelight, the Spring Winds of Peace](#)” [candlelight, spring winds], *Changbi Weekly Commentary*, March 21, 2018.

¹² Perhaps a legacy of settler colonialism for which perfidy belongs exclusively to the Indians. Trump no doubt shares the mentality, except that he seems to have picked Kim Jong Un as a candidate for the ‘good Indian’.

¹³ For a recent example see the front page lead article in *The New York Times* by David Sanger and William Broad, “In North Korea, Missile Bases Suggest a Great Deception” (November 12, 2018), and Leon Sigal’s commentary the following day in *38 North*, “[The New York Times’ Misleading Story on North Korean Missiles](#)”.

¹⁴ Naturally, limits on autonomy work in different ways north and south: fairly obvious military and diplomatic subservience to the U.S. in South Korea, and in the north, the DPRK’s inability in the international arena to obtain what it needs, such as diplomatic recognition, trade openings and benefits of international aid, and reparation and compensation from Japan for its colonial rule.

¹⁵ Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History*, Random House 2010, 207.

¹⁶ This is a literal rendering of the Korean ‘*najŭn tangye ŭi yŏnbangje*’, as the dictionary meaning of *yŏnbang* is federation. But Pyongyang has always translated Kim Il Sung’s proposal for a *Koryŏ Yŏnbang Konghwaguk* as ‘Korean Confederal Republic’, so that with the qualifier ‘low-stage’ added, Kim Jong Il would not have been stretching the point too much when he assured Kim Dae-jung, in response to the latter’s and his aide’s argument why *yŏnbangje* would not do at the present stage, that he saw no real difference between the President’s idea and his own. See the eye-witness account by the same aide, Lim Dong-won, *Peacemaker: Twenty Years of Inter-Korean Relations and the North Korean Nuclear Issue. A Memoir*, Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University, 2012, 46-47. The South Korean idea of *yŏnhap* is often rendered as ‘confederation’, but as it postulates two sovereign states and no single government, not even a confederal one, the term commonwealth or association would be more appropriate.

¹⁷ In this regard I have serious problems with those intellectuals (generally classified as ‘progressives’) who, with prospects for peace becoming brighter this year, have begun calling for ‘peace without unification’, legitimately criticizing calls for immediate and/or full reunification as counterproductive to peace but going further to imagine a permanent (and presumably amicable) coexistence of two divided

states in a denuclearized peninsula—without providing any roadmap toward denuclearization or amicable separation. This is not the place to fully address the issue, but I have tried to do so in Korean on several occasions. See, inter alia, Paek Nakch’öng, “Reunification with Civic Participation and Peace in the Korean Peninsula” [한국반민족문제연구소, *Tonghyang kwa chönmang* [통향과 전망] 104, Autumn-Winter 2018, Pak Yöngryul Publishers, 9-54, and “What Kind of North-South Association Shall We Make?” [한반도 평화 협상], *The Changbi Quarterly* 181, 17-34, also available in Japanese: Peku Nakuchong [베크나쿠쵡], “What Kind of North-South Association Shall We Make?” [한반도 평화 협상], tr. Aoyagi Junichi, *Sekai* [세이], October 2018, 219-228.

¹⁸For my thoughts on the incident, see my *The Division System in Crisis*, chapter 13 “Reflections on Korea in 2010,” 187-92.

Featured image is from Antiwar.com

The original source of this article is [The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus](#)
Copyright © [Prof. Nak-chung Paik](#), [The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus](#), 2018

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: **[Prof. Nak-chung Paik](#)**

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). Asia-Pacific Research will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. Asia-Pacific Research grants permission to cross-post Asia-Pacific Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Asia-Pacific Research article. For publication of Asia-Pacific Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: editors@asia-pacificresearch.com

www.asia-pacificresearch.com contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: editors@asia-pacificresearch.com