

We Want Peace, Not War, with North Korea!

—South Korean and Japanese Activists

Prior to Trump's Asian tour, activists made plans through 2018 and beyond. Ji-Yeon Yuh, a resident of Seoul and Chicago, reported in an October 25 in a webinar produced by Women Cross the DMZ:

Today at the International Airport in South Korea, fifteen South Korean activists preparing to embark on a speaking tour of the United States were prevented from departing and told that they could not enter the U.S. without official printed visas issued by the U.S. Embassy. They learned later that their usual visa waiver for citizens of countries like South Korea with travel agreements with the U.S. had been cancelled. This is the first time that the United States has prevented South Korean activists from even departing the country. So apparently, the United States does not want Americans to hear from South Korean activists.

So what is it that the U.S.—and, in this context, the U.S. refers to hawkish U.S. policymakers — doesn't want American citizens to hear? As an expert in Asian American issues, a faculty member in the History Department at Northwestern University and a board member of the Korean Policy Institute, Ji-Yeon Yuh was well positioned to host an online forum that allows Americans to hear the voices of Korean and Japanese peace activists. She introduced the webinar by asking the audience to look at realities beyond the comic book version that mass media provides about North Korea (The Democratic People's Republic of Korea/DPRK):

Take a closer look behind the headlines and it is clear that people in Asia, specifically South Korea and Japan, are thinking about engagement with North Korea... if you want to look and if you're interested there are signs of the possibility for peace, and some of the clearest signs come from the dedicated peace activists in South Korea and Japan who warn us of the dangers of hostilities and war and show us the many paths that can lead to peace.

Choi Eun-A, chair of the Reunification Committee of the Korean Alliance for Progressive Movements, was the first to speak. The alliance, based in Seoul, South Korea, was created to bring together various movements and campaigns for peace and Korean reunification. Founded in 1994, it is an NGO with about 12,000 members and has a special consultancy status with the UN:

We see the current conflict between the U.S. and North Korea as fundamentally the product of the unended Korean War and an antagonism that has continued for sixty years since the signing of the armistice in 1953. [The armistice was supposed to be a cessation of hostilities. There was no peace treaty concluded to end the war.] For decades the U.S. has considered North Korea an enemy state, deploying U.S. troops and weapons of mass destruction in South Korea, holding massive war games—in other words, carrying out shows of force, and also the South Korean government has spent ten times more in the area of defense and has put asymmetric pressure on North Korea.

She said further that lessons learned from the fate of non-nuclear nations were the motivating factor in North Korea's quest for nuclear weapons:

When the multilateral agreements reached through the Six Party Talks* were ignored or rejected unilaterally by the United States and the U.S. pursued a policy of regime collapse and war in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, these were key in driving North Korea to strengthen its own deterrence capability, particularly in the form of nuclear weapons.

What will the pro-peace movement do to change the dynamic on the Korean peninsula? Choi Eun-A explained that on their immediate agenda was to seize the opportunity of Trump's visit to South Korea. Peace activists planned a series of actions throughout the country letting it be known that "war-threatening weapons salesman Trump is unwelcome" and that 1) they do not accept threats of war, military actions, and sanctions against North Korea. 2) They don't want THAAD [The Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system which was recently installed by the U.S. in South Korea] and, adding insult to injury, the idea that South Korea should pay for the cost of hosting it and U.S. troops. 3) They want the U.S. to stop demanding the renegotiation of the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement.

In the long term, peace activists want an end to military aggression and a conclusive peace treaty with North Korea. Recognizing that civil society in the U.S. and pro-peace elements in South Korea, Japan, and China have all proposed this before, Choi Eun-A concludes that the task of the coalition she represents is to "translate this into building a movement in South Korea."

Lee Tae-Ho, deputy secretary general of the Policy Committee of People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), South Korea. This organization encourages people to recognize the urgency of the current situation and pressure policymakers. Here's how:

Discussing preemptive strike policy, continuing the war games, selling more weapons of mass destruction to South Korea—all of these things will only drive North Korea to continue to strengthen its nuclear and strike capabilities... So what we're planning are many actions to 1) build consensus among the broader public of a more critical consciousness about how real the war threats are and 2) emphasize the fact that these decisions are being made without any consultation of the actual people living on the Korean peninsula.

He spoke about the necessity of providing incentives for North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons and about what the governments of South Korea and the U.S. need to do to make it happen. But the U.S. is instead intensifying sanctions against North Korea, while the South Korean military defense budget surpasses the entire GDP of North Korea:

The intelligence agencies of the U.S. and South Korea both agree that North Korea's so-called nuclear threat is an asymmetric threat. This term is used to refer to a situation where a militarily weaker nation develops a deterrent capability to counter threats from militarily superior nations.

So it's up to the nations with the superior military strength to act, and that means "talks without conditions" and "the U.S. and South Korean governments coming to the table with a proposal that makes sense for North Koreans." In addition:

Our message to both the Trump and Moon [South Korean President Moon Jae-in] administrations is that they should not just focus on North Korea's nuclear weapons. In fact, all surrounding countries around the Korean peninsula have pursued military policies and strategies based on nuclear weapons as a deterrence, so you cannot just focus unilaterally on North Korea.

We're talking about eliminating nuclear threats to all of Asia. And if that sounds like too much of a task, at least in the immediate future there is the Olympics coming up in South Korea in 2018. The U.S. and South Korean governments can at least stop the military exercises scheduled for this spring and demonstrate that they are ready to sit down and negotiate for peace.

Yoshioka Tatsuya, co-founder and director, **Peace Boat, Japan**. Founded in 1983, Peace Boat has launched more than 90 boats sailing the seas manned by international volunteers engaging in antiwar, peace, and sustainability projects.

Japan is in a different situation than South Korea. Every time North Korea fires a missile, Prime Minister Abe, who was recently reelected, takes advantage of the situation to "promote fear in Japan against North Korea and try to promote and encourage the right wing, or the people who really, really pursue the militarization of Japan." [Article 9 of the Japanese constitution renounces war and the threat of war as a means of settling international disputes.]

Japan regards not only North Korea but also South Korea and China as threats. Tatsuya sees "a dramatic change in Japanese society." As in the U.S., there is a problem with media manipulation of the public, which is generating fear and creating a dangerous atmosphere promoting Japanese militarization, "including, I think, nuclear weapon development in Japan."

This change has come about in spite of the fact that the Japanese public has long been opposed to nuclear weapons because the nation experienced their effect in 1945 when the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing a quarter of a million people instantly, most of them civilians, and causing others horrible suffering from radiation poisoning in the aftermath.

Still, sentiment remains opposed to nuclear weapons in Japan. Tatsuya says that the peace movement can make use of the momentum gained with the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize being awarded to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. (ICAN). Acknowledging that it won't be easy, he remains hopeful that this is an opportunity for the world to shift 180 degrees away from nuclear weapons. He says pro-peace activists in Japan will pressure the U.S. and all nations to sign the treaty.

All of the activists mentioned the 2018 Olympics to be hosted by Pyeongchang, South Korea, as did Lee Tae-Ho of the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy. A stop to the war exercises and threats during the time of the Olympics can provide a space for dialogue and peacemaking. Pointing to cooperation with North Korea in the past, activists look ahead to opportunities in the future. In the long term, they are working for an end to the Korean War, a permanent peace treaty between North and South Korea, and reunification of Korea.

Both South Koreans and Japanese have a goal of seeing nuclear weapons eliminated in Asia and the world. And they ask for solidarity with people of peace everywhere.

Endnote:

*North and South Korea, the U.S., China, Japan, and Russia came together in efforts to reach an agreement on the dismantling of North Korea's nuclear weapon program in 2003 to 2009.

Further Resources on Korea: *Korean Quarterly* Free in public venues throughout the Twin Cities or at koreanquarterly.org See also: womenwalkdmz.org