



apcss.org/nexus

SECURITY NEXUS

A free, open access, international, peer-reviewed, online publication for the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies faculty and alumni.

Security Nexus Perspectives

THE JOINT RECOVERY OF FALLEN SOLDIERS FROM THE KOREAN WAR: ONE WAY FOR AMERICAN, CHINESE, NORTH AND SOUTH KOREAN SOLDIERS TO COOPERATE AND RECONCILE

By Dr. Sungmin Cho *

Introduction

While the Biden Administration was reviewing its North Korea policy, Pyongyang once again raised tensions by firing two ballistic missiles on March 24, 2021.¹ Given North Korea's triple whammy in 2020, — namely the pandemic-related health crisis, economic crisis, and natural disaster —, experts anticipate that the stress-ridden country is likely to continue military provocations. Therefore they urge the Biden administration to send an early signal to Pyongyang for talks and diplomacy.² In fact, the Biden administration has already reached out to North Korea, but Pyongyang has not responded.³ A new approach is needed to break through the diplomatic stalemate on the Korean Peninsula, where uncertainty and the potential for future crisis has been mounting in the midst of strategic competition between the U.S. and China.

This paper proposes an idea for diplomatic breakthrough: soldiers from the four countries of the U.S., China, North and South Korea can work together to recover the remains of their predecessors who died during the Korean War seventy years ago. Based upon the information collected from Korean, Chinese and English sources, I explain how the joint recovery project can be implemented and why each country is likely to join the multilateral cooperation. The recovery of war remains may not directly contribute to denuclearization of North Korea or the strategic competition between the U.S. and China, but the project can help to avoid the worst-possible outcomes from the current developments surrounding the Korean Peninsula.

* Dr. Cho is a professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) in Honolulu, USA. The views expressed in this article are the author's alone, and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the DKI APCSS or the United States Government.

The Joint Recovery Project and its Intended Effects

The joint recovery can start from the Arrowhead Ridge, located inside the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) of the Korean Peninsula. Between November 1951 and July 1952, two South Korean Army Divisions, the Second Division of the U.S. Army, a French battalion and the Chinese troops fought to take over the Arrowhead Ridge for nine months.⁴ Based upon the Compressive Military Agreement signed between two Koreas on September 19, 2018, South Korea's Ministry of National Defense Agency for KIA Recovery and Identification (MAKRI) started excavation in the area of Arrowhead Ridge.⁵ In 2019 and 2020, MAKRI found the body parts of 404 soldiers in total.⁶ Some 17,000 articles were found together, which include an identification tag of a French soldier, the U.S. bulletproof jackets and the Chinese gas masks.⁷ According to the Colonel Moon, the head of South Korea's Joint Recovery Project task force, the bodies and articles were found in surprisingly good conditions in the area, which makes the battle scenes inside the DMZ a good place to start joint recovery project.⁸

Once successfully launched, the soldiers from four countries can move to the site of "the Battle of Chosin Reservoir" inside North Korea. Between November 27 and December 13 of 1950, the brutal 17-day battle in freezing winter resulted in the casualties of 10,495 for the U.S. and South Korean forces and 48,156 for the Chinese troops.⁹ For this reason, the U.S. Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) lists the Chosin reservoir as a priority site for search within North Korea.¹⁰ Although they could not reach the agreement, there is a precedent that Washington and Pyongyang had previously discussed the possibility of joint recovery project in the Chosin reservoir area. If China and North Korea agree, it will make the first case that the soldiers from the four countries cooperate for a humanitarian mission on the soil of North Korea.

The joint recovery project is feasible because four countries already have abundant experiences of repatriating the war remains at bilateral settings. (1) Between South Korea and the United States, the DPAA and MARKI have conducted joint identification twice to four times per year since 2008.¹¹ (2) Between North Korea and the United States, during the 2018 summit in Singapore, President Trump and Chairman Kim agreed to "commit to recovering POW/MIA remains, including the immediate repatriation of those already identified".¹² North Korea then repatriated 55 boxes of the remains of the U.S. troops in August 2018.¹³ (3) Between North and South Korea, as noted above, the two countries signed an agreement to conduct joint recovery at the Arrowhead Ridge in 2019.¹⁴ (4) Between South Korea and China, a total of 716 sets of Chinese remains have been transferred from South Korea to China between 2014 and 2020. (5) Between the U.S. and China, the two governments signed an agreement in 2008 that the Chinese researchers at the Archives Department of the PLA would review classified documents and provide relevant information to the U.S. counterparts.¹⁵ The series of bilateral cooperation constitutes a favorable condition to launch multilateral cooperation.

The joint recovery project can generate multiple effects in a positive direction. First and foremost, its symbolic implication would be powerful: the soldiers from the countries who once fought a war gather in the same place, but not to fight again but to cooperate for a peaceful mission this time. The act of recovering and identifying the fallen heroes together would symbolize the process of reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula. The humanitarian mission not only has moral ground in and of itself, but also can yield some strategic effects. The joint recovery project will provide an opportunity for strategic communication between Washington and Pyongyang. Through the meetings to discuss the joint recovery project,

Washington can evaluate Pyongyang's thinking on the conditions and timing for the resumption of denuclearization negotiation.¹⁶ Likewise, the joint recovery project can facilitate the dialogue between Washington and Beijing for the crisis management regarding Korean Peninsula.

Each Country's Likely Motivations to Participate in the Joint Recovery Project

From the U.S. perspective, it has been challenging to create an opportunity for escalation control while pressuring North Korea for denuclearization at the same time. A growing number of experts in the U.S. call for a new approach toward North Korea with a focus on arms control as a realistic goal instead of disarmament or complete denuclearization, which are deemed unachievable at the moment.¹⁷ Yet no one went far to claim that Washington should completely abandon the goal of denuclearization and officially accept North Korea as a nuclear state.¹⁸ As long as the denuclearization of North Korea remains an ultimate goal of the U.S. policy, it is inevitable that the security tensions persist between the U.S. and North Korea. As much as Washington aims to make North Korea give up its nuclear weapons, it is necessary to find ways to relieve the tensions during the negotiation process. The joint recovery project can serve to control the escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

From North Korea's perspective, the joint recovery project may look useful to pursue other economic benefits. Pyongyang may well demand a de-facto economic compensation for the participation in the multilateral cooperation. Indeed, North Korea previously had claimed a total of \$22 million for the repatriation of 628 bodies of U.S. troops between 1990 and 2005. Vincent Brooks, a former commander of the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), said that the repatriation of the remains of U.S. troops stopped in 2019, due to Pyongyang's excessive demand of money and materialistic compensations.¹⁹ But knowing what North Korea wants, the three countries of U.S., China and South Korea can discuss the maximum amount of the fund that they can form in the name of economic incentives for North Korea's cooperation. The amount does not have to meet North Korea's expectations or demands, but certainly offering something would be better than nothing to encourage Pyongyang to join the multilateral cooperation.

It may not be easy to persuade China to join the multilateral efforts, but it is not impossible either. Beijing has been failing to meet Washington's expectations to exert influence over Pyongyang for denuclearization.²⁰ China has not thoroughly executed the economic sanctions against North Korea, as required by the UN Security Resolution.²¹ With the proposal of joint recovery, however, Beijing is not asked to negatively pressure Pyongyang this time, but to positively persuade North Korea to join the reconciliation efforts. Cooperating for humanitarian and peaceful mission will provide a diplomatic opportunity for China to enhance its international image as well.²² Beijing also has a domestic interest in recovering the remains of fallen troops from the Korean War. The Chinese government has utilized the repatriation of war remains from South Korea as a propaganda opportunity to boost the military morale and nationalism.²³ On April 16, 2020, China's Ministry of Veteran Affairs established the Center for Accounting the Remains of War Fallen (*lieshi yihai souxun jian ding zhongxin* 烈士遗骸搜寻鉴定中心).²⁴ Having both diplomatic and domestic motivations, Beijing is more likely to endorse the joint recovery project.

South Korea would welcome the proposal most enthusiastically. The joint recovery project perfectly fits the Moon Jae-in government's vision of reconciliation and peace on the Korean Peninsula, which also might serve to ameliorate South Korea's dilemma between the U.S. as security ally and China as top trading partner. One cannot exclude the possibility that the conservative party may win the next presidential election in March 2022 and return to the competitive approach against North Korea. Still, the conservative government shares the same goal of security and stability of the Korean Peninsula. As long as Washington supports the joint recovery project, South Korea's conservative groups would not necessarily oppose the continuation of multilateral efforts for humanitarian mission. The international community's endorsement for the U.S.-China cooperation would reinforce South Korea's confidence in pushing for the joint recovery project, whether the conservatives or the progressives are in power.

Conclusion: Two-Track Approach

Of course, the joint recovery project may not contribute to the denuclearization of North Korea or U.S. strategic competition with China. It is also possible that North Korea may use the humanitarian mission as a distraction from its continued development of nuclear and missile capabilities. Pyongyang can use the recovery project as an opportunity to demand the peace declaration, and then the withdrawal of the USFK. Beijing too can use the reconciliation event as an excuse to demand a reduction in US-South Korea military exercises. In fact, such worst-case scenarios could result from any line of engagement with North Korea or China. But, so long as Washington and Seoul are cautious of such developments, they will be able to quickly notice the early signs if Pyongyang or Beijing try to exploit the humanitarian mission. Concerns for the worst-case scenarios should not discourage the two-track approach of pursuing the joint recovery project in parallel with denuclearization negotiation or strategic competition.

Joint recovery is proposed not as a silver bullet to solve the problems on the Korean Peninsula, but as a guardrail to prevent the worsening of the situation. Denuclearization of North Korea and prevailing in the strategic competition with China are both important goals for the U.S. and its allies, but no one wants to see another war on the Korean Peninsula. One of key lessons from the Korean War is the importance of direct communication between competitors in international politics. Beijing underestimated Washington's commitment to defend South Korea in 1950. In turn, Washington did not seriously take Beijing's signal to intervene once the UN forces crossed the 38th parallel line.²⁵ Had they conveyed and understood each other's resolve and interests more directly, they might have been able to avoid the bloody conflict that President Eisenhower found wasteful: the borders after the war remain virtually identical to the prewar frontiers at the 38th parallel at a cost of millions of human lives.²⁶ If one can agree that having one more channel of communication and one more contact for dialogue would do no harm to the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula, the joint recovery project will certainly provide such opportunities.

The views expressed in this article are the author's alone, and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the DKI APCSS or the United States Government.

April 2021

¹ Laura Bicker, “North Korea fires two ballistic missiles into the sea,” *BBC News*. March 25, 2021. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56518998>

² For example, Ken Gause, director of the Adversary Analytics Program at CNA, a U.S.-based research and consulting firm, said failing to send early signals for talks could give North Korea a free pass to raise threats. See Christy Lee, “Early Signals to North Korea Seen as Key to Keeping Door Open to Diplomacy,” *Voice of America*. March 7, 2021. Available at <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/early-signals-north-korea-seen-key-keeping-door-open-diplomacy>

³ The Biden administration official said there had been no active dialogue between the United States and North Korea for more than a year, including at the end of Trump's administration, “despite multiple attempts during that time by the United States to engage.” See “No North Korea Response to Biden Administration Outreach,” *Voice of America*. March 13, 2021. Available at <https://www.voanews.com/usa/no-north-korea-response-biden-administration-outreach-us-official-says>

⁴ “그래픽 뉴스: 남북공동유해발굴 (Graphic News: South-North Korea Joint Recovery)” *Yeonhap News*. November 20, 2020. Available at <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/MYH20201120015800038>

⁵ Jo, Hye-rim. “[From the Scene] DMZ uncovered: Traces of Korean War left untouched on Arrowhead Ridge,” *The Korea Herald*. June 2, 2019. Available at <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20190602000176>

⁶ “돌아오지 못한 청년들...남북공동사업 내년 봄 가능할까 (Young soldiers not returned...would the inter-Korea project be possible in the next spring?).” *KBS News*. November 20, 2020. Available at <https://news.kbs.co.kr/news/view.do?ncd=5052636>

⁷ “Graphic News: South-North Korea Joint Recovery,” *Yeonhap News*.

⁸ “Young soldiers not returned...would the inter-Korea project be possible in the next spring?” *KBS News*.

⁹ Roy Appleman. *Escaping the Trap: The US Army X Corps in Northeast Korea, 1950*. Texas A&M University Press (June 1, 2000); Xue, Yan (徐焰) and Li, Jian (李健) 朝鲜战争—长津湖之战四 [Korean War — Battle of Changjin Lake, Part Four] (in Chinese) Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (1990).

¹⁰ Eric Talmadge, “Remains of U.S. MIAs in North Korea in political limbo,” *Military Times*. March 24, 2016. Available at <https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2016/03/24/remains-of-u-s-mias-in-north-korea-in-political-limbo/>

¹¹ ““한미 공동 유해발굴로 동맹 더 굳건 (The U.S.-South Korea alliance hardened with joint recovery project).” *Korea Policy Briefing*. June 12, 2009. Available at <https://www.korea.kr/news/policyBriefingView.do?newsId=148671984>

¹² “READ: Full text of Trump-Kim signed statement,” *CNN*. June 12, 2018. Available at <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/12/politics/read-full-text-of-trump-kim-signed-statement/index.html>

¹³ Hyun, Hye-ran. "트럼프, 북미회담 전에 미군 유해발굴 협상현황 보고받는다(President Trump will be briefed about the recovery and repatriation project before the U.S.-DPRK summit)." *Yeonhap News*. January 31, 2019. Available at <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20190131031200504>

¹⁴ "Graphic News: South-North Korea Joint Recovery," *Yeonhap News*.

¹⁵ Du, Yulu. 2008. "我军开放党案呈现人道主义关怀 (Our military's opening archives of party documents demonstrates our care for humanitarian mission)," *Beijing dang'an* 4. 33-34. While the progress under the agreement has been slow, the DPAA Director Kelly McKeague acknowledged that the POW/MIA cooperation between the U.S. and China has yielded some new information, periodically renewed. See Daniel Wertz. "Korean War POW/MIA Accounting Efforts," *Issue Brief*. The National Committee on North Korea. December 2018. Available at <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/korean-war-powmias>.

¹⁶ In the similar context, Scott Snyder, director of the program on U.S.-Korea policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, commented, "I believe that as part of the administration's policy review, it makes sense to establish a private channel of communications to reach out to North Korea and to evaluate North Korea's response." Lee, "Early Signals to North Korea Seen as Key to Keeping Door Open to Diplomacy."

¹⁷ Harry Kazianis, "How Donald Trump Can Reach a Peace Deal with North Korea," *The National Interest*. April 15, 2019. Available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-donald-trump-can-reach-peace-deal-north-korea-52587?page=0%2C1>; Van Jackson, "Risk Realism: The Arms Control Endgame for North Korea Policy," Center for a New American Security, report. September 24, 2019. Available at <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/risk-realism>

¹⁸ David Santoro, "North Korea: The Folly of War," posted at Real Clear Defense. August 9, 2017. Available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/08/09/north_korea_the_folly_of_war_112008.html

¹⁹ Lee, Yun-tae, "브룩스 前 사령관 "미군 유해 발굴 논의 중단, 北의 '웃돈' 요구 때문 (Brooks, a former Commander, said the recovery discussion with North Korea stopped because of Pyongyang's excessive demand of premium)," *Dong-a Ilbo*, September 20, 2020. Available at <https://www.donga.com/news/Inter/article/all/20200920/103019091/1>

²⁰ Before his meeting with Chinese counterpart in Alaska in March 2021, the U.S. Secretary of State Blinken commented, "Virtually all of North Korea's economic relationships, its trade, are with or goes through China, so it has tremendous influence." Jason Strother, "U.S., China Diplomats Meeting in Alaska," *VOA*. March 18, 2021. Available at <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/us-china-diplomats-meeting-alaska>

²¹ "North Korea defies sanctions with China's help, UN panel says," *The Guardian*. April 17, 2020. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/18/north-korea-defies-sanctions-with-chinas-help-un-panel-says>

²² The Chinese authorities have particularly selected the Korean Peninsula, along with Afghanistan, the Middle East, cyber-security, climate change, public health, as a regional issue that the U.S. and China can “engage in close coordination and cooperation.” See the article signed by Yang Jiechi, a Political Bureau Member of the Chinese Communist Party. “Full text of Yang Jiechi's signed article on China-U.S. relations.” *Xinhua News*. August 7, 2020. Available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1197044.shtml>

²³ Wang, Jingqiang. 2020. “Remains of 117 Chinese soldiers killed in Korean War returned,” *Xinhuanet*. 27 September. Available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/27/c_139401204.htm

²⁴ 退役军人事务部 (Ministry of Veteran Affairs). “退役军人事务部烈士纪念设施保护中心，退役军人信息中心在京挂牌成立 (Ministry of Veteran Affairs Commemoration of Martyrs Center, Veterans Information Center have been established in Beijing.)” posted on April 16, 2020. Available at http://www.mva.gov.cn/sy/xx/bnxx/202004/t20200416_39503.html

²⁵ Thomas J. Christensen, “Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace: The Lessons of Mao's Korean War Telegrams.” *International Security* 17, no. 1 (1992): 122-54.

²⁶ Martin J. Medhurst, “Text and Context in the 1952 Presidential Campaign: Eisenhower's “I Shall Go to Korea” Speech.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2000): 464-84.