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From Firebase to FAO: A Forty-Year Friendship with Korea

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Camp Casey, the headquarters for the U.S. Second Infantry Division (2ID), was dark and wet from a late autumn's rain when I arrived in South Korea on December 1, 1982. The reception station, or turtle farm as it was ubiquitously known then by 2ID Soldiers was a small fenced in compound of Quonset huts. Sitting on my bunk, I reached for my cribbage board and cards, a gift from my father, Mervel A. Minnich Jr., before leaving home. After a couple of games with bunkmates, I fell fast asleep, ending the first day of a lifetime's engagement as a security professional dedicated to the defense of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and its alliance with the United States. I arrived in a centennial year in the ROK-U.S. diplomatic relationship that began with the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between the United States and Korea in 1882. Forty years have passed since my first days in Korea. When I retired from the U.S. Army in 2019, I had served 15-years of a 37-year military career on the Korean Peninsula where I cultivated lifelong friendships and experiences.

As a young artilleryman in 1982 with assignment to Battery A, 1st Battalion, 38th Field Artillery (1-38 FA), I twice deployed from Camp Stanley to Firebase 4P1, which was located north of the Imjin river and just south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Firebase 4P1 had the

distinction of being the U.S. Army's sole remaining firebase since the withdrawal of U.S. ground forces from South Vietnam in 1972. Equipped with six 105mm M102 howitzers that operated from hardened sites, my battery provided direct support fires to U.S. force's patrolling the DMZ and we targeted locations of the Korean People's Army (KPA) in anticipation of a resumption of hostilities that at times seemed a possibility. In support of Team Spirit 1983, a 70-day combined field exercise of nearly 200,000 combatants, my unit forward deployed to the firebase as North Korea ordered its forces to a state of semi-war.

When not deployed to Firebase 4P1 or in field training locations, I garrisoned with my unit at Camp Stanley, which was established in 1954 to the east of the city Uijeongbu and at the base of Mt. Seorak. When I arrived in Korea, my battalion had the previous year replaced its 105mm howitzers with 18 of the U.S. Army's newly designed 155mm M198 towed howitzers. These larger caliber howitzers supported 2nd Brigade with greater battlefield lethality from conventional munitions. Perhaps equally important, these larger howitzers were also special weapons capable and our crews were trained to fire chemical and nuclear munitions. This mission of tactical nuclear weapons delivery was my induction to the special weapons field. In follow-on duties, I was certified and trained on the Nuclear Release and Authentication System or two-man classified system of authorization to fire nuclear weapons and remove permissive action links or locking devices from nuclear warheads. In the later part of this 1-year assignment and after another deployment to the firebase, the battalion was inactivated and then redesignated the 8th Battalion, 8th Field Artillery Regiment on October 1,

1983. Battalions throughout the Army were undergoing similar redesignations to conform to the newly established U.S. Army Regimental System. With the re-designation ceremony completed, the battalion was back training in the field. This training exercise, however, quickly became real when on October 9 a North Korean planted bomb in Rangoon, Burma was exploded in a failed attempt to kill South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan, during his visit to improve state relations. In this horrific killing of 22 people, including cabinet ministers and advisers, our battalion was ordered to orient its howitzers north, draw a combat load of ammunition and prepare to repel a KPA attack. While the order to prepare for combat was rescinded in the days that followed, I had more deeply considered the veneer of peace that overlaid the Korean Armistice Agreement, which by then had been signed 30-years earlier on July 27, 1953. In late November, I departed the Peninsula, but returned again to Camp Stanley for a 2-year assignment with the Division Artillery Headquarters from July 1986 to July 1988.

As I returned to Korea for a fourth tour with 2ID in July 1991, the prospect of the Cold War ending still felt distant although in hindsight, the signs presaging the dissolution of the Soviet Union were manifold. For the first four decades of the ROK-U.S. Alliance, including my then decade-long security relationship with South Korea, the two allies preserved a shared vision of the alliance as a bulwark against the spread of communism. This shared vision was changing, owing to the two nations' diverging threat perceptions and security priorities. As a newly assigned firing platoon leader with Battery C, 1st Battalion, 4th Field Artillery Regiment, we trained hard to provide conventional and nuclear weapons support

to 3rd Brigade. The battalion was located in the western corridor at Camp Pelham. In late August, Moscow survived an attempted coup. With an uncertain end in sight for the Soviet Union, President George W. Bush took actions to induce the Soviets to gain positive control of its nuclear weapons by ordering the redeployment and ultimate destruction of all U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, in a national broadcast on September 28, 1991. This presidential nuclear initiative created space for inter-Korean rapprochement and the signing of two North-South agreements by year's end, including the Joint Denuclearization Declaration, which was the beginning of repeated diplomatic failures to end Pyongyang's burgeoning nuclear weapons program. By December all U.S. nuclear weapons had been removed from Korea, including our battalion's nuclear weapons training devices; a task I assisted. Tactical nuclear weapons were not the only ongoing capabilities reduction effort. In compliance with Congressional mandate, the 3rd Brigade and its support units to include my battalion began deactivating as an organization by redeploying its combat equipment to homeland stocks. This process was finalized in an inactivation ceremony on September 16, 1992; two months after my tour had ended.

In the intervening years, I was assigned to other field artillery units with warfighting missions to support the Korean Theater of Operations. As operation officer for the 17th Field Artillery Brigade, I returned to Korea for field training exercise Gateway 98, a counter-battery fire exercise to defeat enemy indirect fire. This was among my final tactical-level operations, transitioning thereafter to become a foreign area officer (FAO) or Northeast Asia-focused expert in political-military operations.

In July 1999, I returned to Korea for FAO training and immediately matriculated at Sogang University for 18 months of language training. Learning the Korean language, as I did, deepened my relationship with Korea and its people.

In February 2001, I joined three other foreign officers in class 01-1 of the Korean Army Staff College. My sponsor, Major Kim Heung-taek, helped me throughout the course and became a lifelong friend; he later retired a brigadier general. Selected by the U.S. Army to attend its Command and General Staff College, I left Korea and enrolled in the school at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. I was absolutely delighted to sponsor ROK Army (ROKA) Major Kim Jeong-yoo. We quickly bonded as friends and were fortunate to work together over the years; he later retired as a major general.

Fighting the Global War on Terrorism and halting nuclear weapons proliferation were new organizing principles of the U.S. military when I returned to Korea in June 2004 as the policy branch chief for U.S. Forces Korea (USFK). These principles seemed to hold less importance in Seoul and among South Koreans who then seemed acutely more nationalistic in their worldview. To cooperatively transform the alliance, the two sides meet frequently in deputy minister-level talks that was termed "The Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance Policy Initiative" or FOTA. Together with my counterpart at the American Policy Division of the Ministry of National Defense (MND), then Lieutenant Colonel Lee Jong-sup (the former defense minister), working with several others, we advanced numerous alliance management priorities. These alliance

issues worked to (1) implement the Land Partnership Plan and Yongsan Relocation Plan to consolidate U.S. forces onto fewer installations, (2) transfer 10 military missions from U.S. to ROK forces, (3) withdraw 9,000 U.S. forces from Korea, (4) evaluate the combined command relationship, and (5) study a joint vision for the alliance of the future. These two years as an alliance manager were dynamic and professionally consequential for me as I worked alongside many talented individuals. These networked experiences connected me as I relocated to the U.S. Joint Military Affairs Group in Korea, or JUSMAG-K as it had become known over time.

JUSMAG-K was formally established on July 1, 1949 as an advisory group to assist the professionalization and training of the Korean defense forces. When initially joining the organization as a director in June 2006, I established my office in the newly constructed Defense Acquisition Program Agency (DAPA) headquarters that abutted the Yongsan Garrison. Only six months earlier on January 1, MND had formed DAPA to better manage the ROK's massively expanding defense procurement industry by consolidating existing defense acquisition activities within its organization and among the three military services. DAPA coordinated its multibillion-dollar U.S. procurement portfolio with JUSMAG-K. In the years following South Korea's designation as a Major Non-NATO Ally by Congress in 1987, it had risen by 2006 to be the third largest foreign military sales (FMS) partner of the United States with over \$3 billion of annual sales and projections to invest \$290 billion in defense reform by 2020. Among our priorities then was to facilitate Korea's inclusion in the U.S. Arms Export Control Act as a NATO+3 country

alongside Australia, New Zealand and Japan, which was realized two years later by U.S. Congress. As deputy chief, I moved my office to the headquarters and coordinated the breadth of our priorities, including the integration of Aegis Combat Systems on KDX-III destroyers, delivery of 40 F-15K fighters, fleet engine replacement of KF-16 fighters, procurement of SAM-X Patriot launchers and missiles, and approval for procurement of RQ-4 Block 30 Global Hawk aircraft. Reassignments were always bitter sweet, but it was made easier this time having been selected to attend the national security course at the Korea National Defense University in Seoul in January 2009. Somewhat surprisingly, in a class of some 200 students, I was one of only seven international fellows. My sponsor was ROK Air Force Colonel Kang Kyu-sik, who graduated the course valedictorian and would eventually retire a brigadier general. Graduating in December with honors, I spent the next several years until returning to Korea in 2013 fully engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom, including a yearlong deployment and multiple trips to Afghanistan.

Straddling the military demarcation line that separates the two Koreas is the Military Armistice Commission Headquarters Area (MACHA), the place of negotiating and supervising the Armistice Agreement, which was inaugurated at its signing on July 27, 1953 and was 60-years in vigilant implementation when I became the 37th Secretary of the United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission (UNCMAC) in August 2013. Revitalizing the Secretariat took on an immediate and enduring importance that began by transforming a largely U.S.-centric organization into a robust multinational commission that included 15

international officers from five foreign countries. Within weeks, the ROK accepted the invitation and assigned six senior military officers to the Secretariat to include a deputy secretary. The newly assigned Canadian officer accepted the position as chief of staff. Colombia accepted the invitation and quickly assigned two operations officers. New Zealand did likewise by augmenting its contingent of three operations officers with an education officer and operation sergeant, expanding its contingent to five officers. Denmark continued its support with an assigned operations officer. The expanded scope of work necessitated this force augmentation in the Secretariat.

Three UN blue buildings within the MACHA or the Joint Security Area as it is known colloquially have become iconic of Armistice engagements. Of these three buildings, the far-right building facing north is the Secretary's conference room and is where I sat down on September 11, 2013, just three weeks into the job, for a one-hour meeting with my North Korean counterpart, Senior Colonel Pak Ki-yong. This meeting benchmarked a pattern for routine and measured bilateral communications that established transparency of actions, which repeatedly served to deescalate rising tensions during my tenure. Over a 17-month period, we worked to remove 124 ROKA heavy weapons and positions from the DMZ through more than 1,000 inspections of 500 plus locations throughout the breadth of the 151-mile-long DMZ. This arms control action ended a multiyear buildup that grew from the 2010 sinking of the *ROKS Cheonan* and artillery shelling of the northwest island of Yeonpyeong-do by the KPA. The DMZ is a four-kilometer-wide buffer zone around a centerline or more accurately the military

demarcation line (MDL), which was the final line of contact between fighting forces that was formalized in the armistice agreement by a line drawn on a map to divide the two Koreas. In August 1953, teams staked into the ground 1,292 8-foot steel pickets with metal markers along the MDL at about 200-meter intervals. Intervisible from both sides, these MDL markers provided visual awareness of the separation line. Time and climate eventually took their toll on the MDL markers as signs rusted and fell to the ground or were lost to vegetation overgrowth. The issue of the MDL not being visibly marked finally became an issue when on the morning of June 12, 2014, a 3-man KPA patrol slightly crossed the MDL along the Kumseong stream and was fired at from a ROKA guard post. An investigation of this incident immediately revealed that neither side could precisely locate the MDL without visible MDL markers. Over the next year, ROKA forces at guard posts throughout the DMZ repeatedly fired at KPA patrols as they crossed south of an MDL that was neither marked on the ground nor accurately depicted on outdated maps.

The persistence of these direct fire engagements gave urgency to a need to accurately identify the MDL. To that end, from December 2014 UNCMAC led a 6-months-long joint field operation to accurately locate through survey the remaining MDL markers and to create a revised definition of the entire MDL with the ROK Defense Geospatial Intelligence Agency, the U.S. National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency and the United Kingdom's 42 Engineer Regiment (Geographic). Of the original 1,292 MDL markers, fewer than 15% remained visible. This was further complicated by varying definitions of the MDL location and

inaccuracies from an armistice agreement map that plotted grid coordinates at a 1:50,000 scale on a Tokyo datum of 1898, which is less accurate than the modern WGS84 system and is unusable without conversion. The project was comprehensive as the team surveyed all visible markers and extracted the MDL transforming coordinates into the WGS84 system, using the modern Geographic Information System. Left unrealized still, however, is the task of jointly marking the MDL again with the KPA to forestall hostilities from inadvertent crossings of the line of separation.

As the use of armed force in the DMZ continued, the UNCMAC Secretariat led a bilateral ROK and UNC operational planning team that produced and promulgated an unclassified Armistice Rules of Engagement (AROE) Soldier's Card to guide all frontline units. To further reduce the incident rate of crisis escalation, we concurrently instituted the systematic education of Armistice compliance to all front-line units, including the two ROK naval fleets, one marine division, 12 infantry divisions and 26 infantry regiments.

Despite such tension reduction efforts, an inter-Korean crisis of historic proportion erupted in August 2015. Patrolling the southern portion of the DMZ on the morning of August 4, two ROKA Soldiers were grievously maimed as they inadvertently detonated two KPA implanted landmines. As tensions rose, the ROKA assessed on August 20 that the KPA had fired a single 14.5 mm bullet and two rounds from a 76.2mm anti-tank gun toward the south. In rapid response, the ROKA 28th Infantry Division fired 29 155mm artillery projectiles near a KPA guard post in the northern

sector of the DMZ. In quick succession, ROKA and KPA forces across the DMZ elevated their respective security postures as Pyongyang placed its forces in a state of semi-war. As UNCMAC immediately began investigating the crisis, I met with senior ROKA commanders and together with the UNC commander we briefed the ROK Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on preliminary findings of the investigation. Within 36 hours, UNCMAC was facilitating marathon talks at the Joint Security Area as inter-Korean, high-level leaders successfully de-escalated a rapidly degenerating security situation.

Within a few short months, North Korea again ratcheted tensions high with a fourth nuclear weapons test on January 6, 2016, which led to bilateral blaring of speakers across the DMZ while the North undertook a sustained propaganda campaign of flying leaflet balloons into the south. The North further exacerbated this tense security situation with the employment of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) in the DMZ. In response, UNCMAC immediately dispatched an investigation team and then condemned the KPA's Armistice violation, clearly defining the unacceptable military employment of balloons and UAVs in the DMZ. Tensions remained high, however, as North Korea launched into orbit a reconnaissance satellite on February 7, 2016, which South Korea responded to by announcing the permanent closure of the Gaeseong Industrial Complex. This inter-Korean special economic zone rapidly expanded from 18 to 125 South Korean tenant companies and 6,013 to 54,988 North Korean workers over 10 years of operation from 2005 to 2015. Quickly, we then supported the repatriation of South Korean workers and the blockage of the southern access to the Western

Transportation Corridor, a narrow stretch of road through the DMZ that was painstakingly constructed after the June 2000 inter-Korean summit agreement. When the corridor was closed in February 2016, the Secretariat had been approving and monitoring 125,000 crossings annually between the two Koreas.

No sooner had this crisis been resolved than we received word in late-March from the ROKA Capital Corps of ongoing illegal incursions by Chinese fishing vessels in the Han River Estuary. By then upward of 20 vessels had committed more than 200 incursions. Despite precedence for such armistice violations in the Han River Estuary, UNCMAC successfully pressed for UNC approval of ROK maritime operations to expel these unauthorized incursions. Over the next several weeks, we labored with UNC and ROK forces preparing for this operation. On the morning of June 10, 2016 as we gathered at ROK Marine Corps tactical operations center, four-armed rigid-hull inflatable boats with ROK forces and UNCMAC observers entered the Han River Estuary where two vessels were apprehended while the others cut their fishing nets and fled. Operating in the HRE was a historic first for the ROK-U.S. alliance that we then routinized through persistent maritime patrols; a mission that was hailed universally by the South Korean people.

As the day dawned on July 15, 2016, I was still gathering thoughts on how to bid farewell to friends and colleagues in a ceremony held that morning to relinquish my duties as the UNCMAC Secretary. Gathered for the event where UNC leaders, ambassadors and liaison officers, each of whom I had spent considerable time with as we jointly labored

to maintain the armistice agreement. Also gathered were Korean friends of many years, including my sponsors from the ROK Army College and National Defense University, then brigadier generals Kim Heung-taek and Kang Kyu-sik. Also attending was Brigadier General Kim Jeong-yoo, who I had sponsored years earlier at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. I was particularly touched to be awarded the Order of National Security Merit Samil Medal from the ROK President for meaningful and sustained service in defense of a South Korea. As expected, this was my final military assignment in Korea, but as a professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, I continue in new ways to the strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance.





Col. Minnich lecturing



(1991) James Minnich with howitzer in Korea



(2013) NK Talks_ Col. Minnich

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