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[Interview] Moon has done more for inter-Korean peace than any other president, US professor says

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Bruce Cumings of the Univ. of Chicago views the Korean War as the outcome of a post-liberation civil war

Bruce Cumings, distinguished service professor at the University of Chicago. (Kim Jung-hyo, staff photographer)

Who is Bruce Cumings?

A distinguished service professor at the University of Chicago, Bruce Cumings, 77, sent shockwaves through the academic community with a new perspective on the Korean War in his monumental work, “The Origins of the Korean War” (published in two volumes in 1981 and 1990).

Rejecting the traditional perspective emphasizing the Soviet Union’s responsibility for the war’s outbreak, he instead presented the analysis that it was the result of a civil war between left and right on the Korean Peninsula that had persisted after Korea’s liberation from Japanese imperialism in 1945. He also maintained that the US played a large part in this, with its employment of former collaborators under the Japanese occupation.

Criticisms of his revisionist perspective intensified in the 1990s with the revelation of a confidential Soviet document stating that North Korea had invaded the South after Kim Il-sung was granted approval by Joseph Stalin. But Cuming has stayed firm in his convictions, insisting that the question of who “pulled the trigger” on the Korean War is less important than understanding the context from which the war emerged.

Cuming’s connection with South Korea dates back to 1967-1968, when he taught English at Sunrin Middle School as a US Peace Corps member. He would go on to marry Meredith Jung-en Woo, a South Korean colleague and student. His books include “Korea’s Place in the Sun” and “The Korean War: A History.” He remains prolifically active, explaining that he was finishing up the spring semester with 90 students in two classes when he was contacted for the interview.

In an interview on June 24, Cumings said that compared to his predecessors Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, current South Korean President Moon Jae-in “has done the most to try and engage North Korea.”

“I think it is very important for President Moon to keep trying to engage with North Korea,” he stressed.

Cumings offered his assessment of the Moon administration’s North Korea policies.

Remarking on the recent rise in inter-Korean tensions with North Korea's demolition of the inter-Korean joint liaison office in Kaesong, he said, "North Korea is trying to gain the attention of the Trump administration."

"I think North Korea still sees President Moon as a person they can work with, even if they are castigating him now," he added.

Cumings was also intensely critical of the arguments from some quarters that "maximum pressure" needs to be applied to the North. "I don't know any evidence that 'maximum pressure' has led to one positive change in North Korean behavior," he said.

"Taken to its logical conclusion, this means war. But one indelible blessing of the Korean War is to demonstrate that there is no military solution to the national division," he continued.

Remarking on the North Korean nuclear issue, Cumings suggested that "the best that South Korea and the US can do is to try and cap the program."

"Clearly North Korea is a nuclear state, de facto," he said.

"[P]robably the best that can be done is to try to limit their nuclear program, rather than failing in an attempt to get rid of it altogether," he added.

"The American demand for FFVD [Final, Fully Verified Denuclearization] has gone absolutely nowhere, so a new direction is needed," he said.

FFVD is unrealistic, capping current nuclear program is more realistic

Hani

June 25 is the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War. It is '70 years' and the division of the Korean Peninsula has not yet been resolved. South Korea and North Korea are still in a armistice, not end-of-war.

What does this long division mean? What do you think are the key reasons for this long division?

Cumings

For Koreans, the long division shows how a thoughtless decision, taken in the middle of the night on August 10– 11 1945 when John J McCoy told Dean Rusk and an associate to go into an adjoining room and find a place to divide Korea, consulting no one, not allies, and of course no Koreans--how such a decision can cut the life blood of an ancient nation, and persist for more than two generations without any end in sight. This is an indelible outcome of Koreans not being able to determine the fate of their own country, and a betrayal of the long-standing historical truth that Korea belongs to the Koreans.

For Americans, this decision created the conditions for a civil war among Koreans, something that was almost an inevitability after 1945. That is, an internecine war between Koreans suddenly became believable, and even likely. When the US then entered that war in 1950s, we see how easy it is to get involved in a war, and how desperately hard it is to get out. In this sense, both Koreas and the United States are trapped in a historical straitjacket.

There are of course many reasons for this long division, but as an American I blame my own leaders for barging into a country and a situation that they knew nothing about. In this sense Korea set a pattern later followed in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq—all "forever wars" except for the defeat in Vietnam. These wars demonstrate the truth that Americans cannot win when they are so ignorant of the people and culture that they are allegedly defending. They also demonstrate the inefficacy of military force in civil wars. These wars are fundamentally political, and the US has managed to consistently ignore the Clausewitzean dictum that war is politics by other means.

Hani

It has been 39 years since your historic masterpiece came out, which opened a new horizon, departing the Cold War perspective, in the research of the Korean War. My understanding is that your key thesis is that 'The Korean War is a civil war which includes international powers involvement, and the United States is highly responsible for the road to the Korean War'. And you showed it when most scholars didn't care about America's responsibilities.

Is this thesis still valid today? Do you still see that it is important and meaningful to emphasize US responsibility? Is there anything you changed your thoughts on after you first wrote this book?

Cumings

Thank you very much for your generous words. I am more convinced of the validity of my conclusions than I was when I wrote my books. There are many reasons for this, but two of the most important are, first, that Korean and Korean-American scholars have done so much to flesh out the history of the people's committees that emerged in 1945, to show the depth of the collaborationist (meaning collaborators with Japan) government that emerged under American auspices and with complete American support, the mind-boggling terror of hundreds of thousands of political massacres before and during the Korean War, and the fundamental Independence and nationalism that motivated the North Koreans. Here I would mention in particular Hwang Su-kyoung's brilliant book, Korea's Grievous War, and fine books by Charles Armstrong, Heonik Kwon, Masuda Hajime, Suzy Kim, and several others.

The other reason, a very profound fact, is that North Korea has long survived the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. If North Korea had also collapsed it would have invalidated my work. But it has not collapsed, showing that the force of revolutionary nationalism and anti-imperialism is at the core of North Korea's existence, and of course the same is true of China, Vietnam, and Cuba—which just happen to be the remaining communist states. North Korea was a part of the East Asian revolution following World War II, not a creature of the Soviet Union.

Hani

Now most people in Korea are post-Korean War generations and most of them do not know much about the Korean War.

What legacy has the Korean War left on the Korean Peninsula? In other words, how did the Korean War affect South Korea and North Korea?

Cumings

The first thing to say is that the war is not over, and so we cannot have a final conclusion on its legacy. But certainly South Korea got from it the complete support of the United States, with a defense treaty and per capita levels of aid among the highest in the world at the time. The US then gave every support to South Korea's export-led development, opening the American market to Korean goods and benefiting from cheap labor in Korea. In retrospect this proved to be a winning strategy, as Koreans turned their country into a major industrial power, with a kind of guaranteed security from the US.

For North Korea the war was an unmitigated disaster. Not only did American firebombing raze every city to the ground, leading to a national grudge against the US that is still very strong in the North, but the goals of the war from the North Korean standpoint were not achieved, while millions of its citizens died. I think in ways that are hard to specify, the North Korean leadership was deeply traumatized by this outcome, and began to withdraw into a shell, trusting no one outside their borders.

A gunner in the US Regimental Combat Team 31 fires a 75mm recoilless rifle on June 9, 1951. (Yonhap News)

S. Korea a global model for democratization

Hani

Could you briefly point out the core changes on the two divided governments on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea and North Korea, after the Korean War?

Cummings

South Korea was a dictatorship in spite of democratic trappings in the First Republic, and that dictatorship lasted until the 1990s. The ROK military was vastly strengthened by the war, and soon expressed that strength by taking over the government in 1961. One of the great achievements of the Korean people was to force this military out of politics and back into their barracks, even if at the cost of long-running protest and bloodshed.

The North Korean government was essentially a coalition of the Left before the war, but after it Kim Il Sung systematically purged his rivals, scapegoating them for the bad results of the war. Within less than a decade he and his allies dominated North Korean politics, and they still do today. The advent of the chuch'e ideology, a fundamentally nationalist and in many ways idealist philosophy, reflecting Korea's heritage of neo-Confucianism, became dominant, just as remnants of Korea's long history of monarchy became evident. It still seems to be the case that for the leader, trust does not extend beyond his family, and the core descendants of the anti-Japanese guerrillas. So you have a leadership that has no relationships of trust with foreign countries, and not much trust between the leadership and the citizenry.

Hani

Korea is considered to be the only country that has achieved economic growth and progress in democracy since World War II.

Cumings

I don't agree with this statement; there are a number of other examples, including of course Taiwan. What I would say is that Korea's industrial prowess is something truly to be proud of, but its long process of democratization is even more admirable. American pundits say things like, "Oh, Korea developed a middle class and then of course it democratized." In fact you had a 40-year struggle, requiring great courage and commitment, to build a civil society and a polity that made military dictatorship impossible to sustain. In this century, Korean candle light processions elected a president (Roh Moo Hyun) and impeached another (Park Geun Hye); I participated in both such processions (on the eve of the election in 2002, and the impeachment in 2016), and I was deeply impressed with their nonviolence amid a vital commitment to democracy.

I think South Korea is the best example in the world of emergence from dictatorship and subsequent democratization.

Hani

What do you think is the current state of Korea's national capabilities and strengths compared to the Korean War? What do you see as the driving force for that?

Cumings

There really is no comparison. At the time of the Korean War a majority of the population was poor and illiterate. If the US had not intervened, the Korean War would've been over in a matter of weeks. You had a vicious dictatorship presiding over a restive and aggrieved population. Now Korea has one of the highest education rates in the world, it is probably the most wired nation in the world, it has just garnered the admiration of the world for its handling of the coronavirus, and it has a world-class conglomerate, Samsung, that competes directly with Apple and other world-class firms.

It is very hard to say what is the single driving force behind all this, but a national passion for education which is centuries old in Korea, is certainly a major part of the explanation.

Bush interrupted Kim Dae-jung's peace process, but Moon has done more than any other S. Korean president for inter-Korean peace

Hani

You had an interview with Hankyoreh in 2010, the 60th anniversary of the Korean War. Compared to 10 years ago, what is the most significant (positive or negative) changes in the Korean Peninsula?

Cumings

To me this is a very interesting question, because in 2006 I put out a revised edition of my book, Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History, because of many changes that had happened since it was first published in 1997. Lately I've asked myself if I need to do another revision, and answer is no. There is a lot of continuity from the Kim-Roh decade to the present with Pres. Moon Jae In. We are again in a progressive moment with President Moon, analogous to the 10 years when Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun were in office. Of these three presidents, I

think Pres. Moon has done the most to try and engage North Korea. For some time it appeared that Pres. Trump was facilitating this engagement, but he has given up on that.

There is also a lot of continuity from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un in the North. A year ago I would've said the Trump-Kim summits were a big positive change, but Trump has made nothing of these visits, and his administration is imploding.

Hani

Since the so-called '1st North Korean nuclear crisis' in the early 1990s, the North Korean nuclear issue has been getting worse. On one hand, there is a claim that the North Korean nuclear issue must be dealt with the 'maximum pressure', and on the other hand, the 'peace process' is the right approach. What is your opinion?

Cumings

Direct negotiations were successful in accomplishing a freeze on the North's plutonium in 1994, and a very important dealto put their missiles in mothballs in 2000. In my view the failure of these policies was primarily the fault of George W. Bush.

I don't know any evidence that "maximum pressure" has led to one positive change in North Korean behavior. Taken to its logical conclusion, this means war. But one indelible blessing of the Korean War is to demonstrate that there is no military solution to the national division. Even Trump, who seriously considered war against the North in his first year in office, was forced to come to this conclusion.

The peace process initiated by Kim Dae Jung, looked very promising in the late 1990s, but George W. Bush torpedoed that effort. I think President Moon has gone beyond even his predecessors Kim DJ and Roh, but he can't get anywhere without American support.

I think the nuclear issue was solvable in the 1990s—North Korea's plutonium was frozen for eight years—but Bush's invasion of Iraq frightened the North Koreans into developing nuclear weapons. Now I don't think there is any turning back; North Korea sooner or later will be recognized as a nuclear weapons state, and the best that South Korea and the US can do is to try and cap the program, with a limited number of A-bombs and missiles.

Clearly North Korea is a nuclear weapons state, de facto. I doubt that United States other countries will agree to this anytime soon. But it is a fact, and given that fact, probably the best that can be done is to try to limit their nuclear program, rather than failing in an attempt to get rid of it altogether. The American demand for FFVD(Final, Fully Verified Denuclearization) has gone absolutely nowhere, so a new direction is needed.

Hani

The South Korea-North Korea-US relations were seen to likely bring about positive changes in North Korea's denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula with Moon Jae in-Kim Jong un-Trump three-leader structure. But now we all are seeing a deadlock.

Do you think the set of Trump-Moon-Kim leadership still is hope for opportunity? Also, do you think 'Trump-style top-town diplomacy' is a good approach to denuclearizing North Korea and establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, even if it is not necessarily 'Trump'?

Cumings

I thought Trump was right to meet with Kim; even though Trump didn't know what he was doing; it was a breakthrough to sweep aside all the failed attempts to isolate North Korea and just reach out to them. But this seems now to be over and done with; Trump is likely to lose to Biden, and Biden will go back to the Clinton-Obama strategy of sanctioning and isolating the North.

Hani

North Korea has recently closed the door to the dialogue by cutting off all the inter-Korean communication channels and exploded the liaison office in Kaesong. North Korea is further escalating tensions by threatening more actions like deploying troops in DMZ etc.

As a passionate Korean history scholar, how do you feel when watching these situations on

Korean peninsula?

Cumings

Maybe I have been around too long, but these things have been happening for decades and they don't surprise me.

Hani

What do you see as North Korea's intentions now, and how should South Korea and the United States respond to this?

I think it's quite clear that North Korea is mainly signaling to the US with its recent provocations. North Korea is trying to gain the attention of the Trump administration. I'm afraid they will have to wait to see if Pres. Trump is reelected. I think North Korea still sees President Moon as a person they can work with, even if they are castigating him now.

Hani

What is your evaluation on the Moon Jae in administration's approach to North Korea?

While the United States adheres to the principle that 'The progress of inter-Korean relation and denuclearization of North Korea must go together', there is a limit to how the South Korean government can make a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations. Do you think Moon Jae in administration is right on making all the efforts to bring progress in inter-Korean relations while the US seems not so supportive in them?

Cumings

Yes, I think it is very important for President Moon to keep trying to engage in North Korea. We are going to have to wait for a new administration in Washington before anything serious will happen.

The less interference from foreign powers the better

Hani

What would advise to two leaders -President Moon and Chairman Kim- regarding peacemaking on Korean peninsula?

Cumings

Please remember that Korea is for the Koreans, and the less foreign interference, the better.

The United States has been a force for division for 75 years, trying in vain to isolate and punished North Korea, and trying to keep South Korea in line—following American policy.

The United States is the only major power that keeps interfering in Korean affairs—other countries do not do this. It is best for the two Koreas to work out their own problems independently. Of course, I don't expect this to happen anytime soon—but it is a goal to be sought after.

Do you think the US wants reunification of the Korean Peninsula or it wants status-quo(continued division)? Why do you think so?

As a matter of policy, the only time American leaders ever showed serious interest in Korean unification, was on the eve of the invasion of the North in the fall of 1950. Unfortunately, no foreign countries have an interest in Korean unification. The old joke that the Japanese like Koreans so much they are happy there are two of them, expresses what probably is a real Japanese fear of unification. (After all, competition from the ROK alone is giving the Japanese heartburn.) Russia and China are not going to sacrifice anything important for Korean unity. So it is up to Koreans to break through this Procrustean Bed of having foreigners, particularly the US, getting in the way of reunification.

Hani

And do you think reunification of the Korean Peninsula is necessary and feasible?

Cumings

I think the sunshine strategy that Kim DJ laid out in his inaugural address in February 1998, is the best South Korean strategy toward unification—but it requires the support of the United States, which existed from 1998 to 2000, and then evaporated.

Hani

The US is a dominant power in Northeast Asia that has a profound effect on the Korean Peninsula. President Trump will be re-elected in the November presidential election, or former Vice President Joe Biden will be the president.

In both cases, how do you expect the US strategy on the Korean Peninsula will last and change?

Cumings

As I said above, Biden will go back to the Clinton and Obama policies that focus on non-proliferation; this is a policy not specific to the North, but includes Iran and in the past, Iraq and Libya. I don't think it will make much difference. The US should normalize relations with the DPRK, and that might finally give the US some influence over Pyongyang. But I don't expect this to happen.

If Trump gets reelected, I have no idea what might happen, because he is the most unpredictable president in American history.

Hani

The conflict between the US and China is getting worse and worse.

What do you think is the impact of the US-China conflict on the Korean Peninsula?

Cumings

So far this conflict has been limited to trade, problems in the South China Sea, and polemics. Korea has not been much involved. I think the US and Chinese economies are so intertwined that this will limit the conflict.

Also, what foreign strategy do you think Korea should take in order not to be overwhelmed by the US-China conflict?

I think that Korea has been very smart, since the 1992 normalization with China, at maintaining good relations with both China and the US. I don't see that changing anytime soon.

Hani

In an interview with Hankyoreh in 2010, you said you were working on a book which would be your last work on the Korean War.

Are we going to see no more books on the Korean War by you?

Cummings

I am still working on it, and thinking about it. The scholarship on the Korean War has really advanced, and I am thinking about what I can contribute to it.

By Hwang Joon-bum, Washington correspondent

Please direct comments or questions to [english@hani.co.kr]

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