**Diplomacy and Solidarity for Korean Peace & Denuclearization:**

**U.S. Actions and Perspectives**

**Joseph Gerson (PhD)**

**Japan-Korea International Peace Forum**

**Seoul, May 30-31, 2019**

I want to thank everyone who organized this unique and important conference for inviting me to participate. It is an honor to be invited to contribute to and learn from this International Forum, especially given the United States’ history of dividing Korea, imposing and supporting dictatorships here, its criminal A-bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that Truman understood weren’t necessary to end the war with Japan or Tokyo’s brutal colonization of Korea, Washington’s numerous threats and preparations to initiate nuclear war against North Korea, and the recent all or nothing diplomacy that led to the failure of the Hanoi summit,

Over the years, in addition to my many collaborations with Gensuikyo in Japan and the U.S., I have been privileged to work with and learn from PSPD and other South Korean peace and democracy organizations. Among my most vivid memories was a visit hosted by a Korean Quaker who had been jailed for thirteen years and tortured by the dictatorship for the “crime” or reading the wrong book. I remember too the trip that he and I took to the DMZ during which he shared with me the emotional pain of Korea’s division and his hopes for reunification. In 2003, when Bush II, with the help of John Bolton, again brought us to the brink of catastrophic nuclear war, I was privileged to host Korean activists and parliament members who came to the U.S. to stress the possibility and urgent imperative of avoiding a catastrophic war. Most recently, I was happy for the opportunity to give Lee Taeho a forum at our “Growing Nuclear Risks in a Changing World: New Thinking and Movement Building” conference in New York and to facilitate meetings for his delegation. Taeho’s analysis and perspectives were invaluable for our movement.

Noam Chomsky, the most widely respected U.S. public intellectual and scholar, recently spoke for our movement when he wrote that “The promise is too great to be lost, the costs of failure are too grim to contemplate. It is imperative for the people of Korea, and of the world, to devote themselves to ensuring the success of the initiatives that are now haltingly underway.”

Until Donald Trump’s “fire and fury” threat to inflict a nuclear holocaust on Koreans, education and organizing about the dangers of a second Korean War, opposition to the US-ROK regime change military exercises that fueled the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program, campaigning to go beyond Obama’s futile “strategic patience” non-diplomacy with the DPRK, opposition to the Jeju naval base and to stop THAAD deployment were not central currents of the U.S. peace movement. Since the disastrous invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the movement had focused on ending Washington’s endless Middle East and Central Asian wars which have expanded into Syria, Libya and Yemen.

The imminent threat of a devastating second Korean war kicked our movement into higher gear. It led to the creation of the national Korea Peace Network which brings together tradition U.S. peace activists and a growing number of Korea-Americans, and sparked KPN collaborations with the inspired women of Women Cross the DMZ. Among the first fruits of this collaboration was a national conference and Congressional lobby day in Washington, D.C. that featured talks by former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry and the renowned historian Bruce Cummings. You will recall that in the final year of the Clinton presidency, Perry negotiated a comprehensive agreement with North Korea that would have prevented the DPRK from becoming a nuclear weapons state. That agreement was derailed when Clinton opted not to travel to Pyongyang to finalize the midst our election crisis. Bush, with the connivance of corrupt political officials and the Republican dominated Supreme Court, were subverting our democracy and stealing the election. Months later, urged on by an undersecretary of state named John Bolton Bush sabotaged Kim Dae-Jung’s Sunshine Policy and trashed the comprehensive agreement.

That KPN conference brought together leading peace advocates from across the country to learn from Perry and Cumings, who stressed that diplomacy leading to peace and North Korean denuclearization was possible. They explained that North Korea’s nuclear arsenal was developed for two reasons: to preserve the Kim dynasty and to defend North Korean independence and sovereignty. North Korean economic development, they said, was Kim’s third but lesser priority. Other speakers at the conference highlighted the need for family reunifications and the diplomatic openings that could be created by arranging repatriation of the remains of U.S. soldiers killed in the Korean War.

Beneath it all, there was a recognition of potential geopolitical shift. If the Korean War could be ended, North Korea denuclearized, and normal relations established, they might provide the way for the DPRK to fully engage in the global economy and to make accommodations with U.S. military and economic power. References were also made to the history of U.S nuclear threats against North Korea and to the possibility of a Northeast Asian Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone as an element of a Korean peace system.

Then, as Washington and Pyongyang dangerously escalated their rhetoric and preparations for war, we were thrilled by Moon Jae-in’s inspired Olympic diplomacy, and we did all that we could to reinforce it. President Moon successfully walked a very reluctant Trump back from the brink of the military and potentially nuclear confrontation to the historic Singapore summit. We did not expect miracles in Singapore. Instead, we pressed for a freeze-for freeze outcome: North Korea committing to extend the cessation of its nuclear and missile tests in exchange for the U.S., South Korea and Japan cancelling their regime change-oriented joint military exercises and reducing sanctions.

The summit’s final declaration exceeded our hopes. Freeze for freeze was codified, as was the commitment by both sides to take the next steps toward peace and denuclearization.

The following day, many of us who had gathered for a lobby day in Washington were angered and depressed by our meetings with Democratic members of Congress and their staffs. Most of them were determined not to provide any support for our tyrant that might contribute to his reelection. Most focused on the vagueness of the Singapore declaration and rebuffed our appeals to challenge Trump from the left by demanding that he provide a roadmap for future U.S.- North Korean diplomacy.

In the months that followed, recognizing the entrenched political forces on all sides, our movement urged continued diplomacy. As next steps, we called for a declaration that would end the Korean War as well as for reduction of sanctions – especially those blocking trust building engagements between South and North Korea. Our expectation was that North Korea would reciprocate.

With the support of former President Jimmy Carter and 18 other members of Congress, Ro Kohana, who is among the most far sighted and courageous Congressional representatives, advanced our campaign by introducing legislation to formally end the Korean War. Another less urgent bill, introduced more recently by Representative Meng that many of us are supporting urges President Trump to make reunions of Korean-Americans with their families in North Korea a priority.

We were encouraged when the media began reporting that the Hanoi summit would advance step-by-step peace-making diplomacy. Most major news outlets anticipated that Trump and Kim Jung-un would agree to declare the end of the Korean War and would provide for establishment of diplomatic offices in their respective capitals in exchange for shuttering the Yongbyon reactor.

We were shocked when National Security Advisor Bolton and Secretary of State Pompeo took the seats next to Trump and made their all or nothing denuclearization demands. The result, as you know, was the failure of the summit, the possible collapse of the diplomacy initiated by President Moon, and a return to square one with its attendant military dangers.

We shouldn’t have been surprised. In 2002, then Under Secretary of State in Bolton urged cancellation of the 1994 Agreed Framework, an agreement which the U.S. apparently never intended to fully implement. He also urged that North Korea be named the third member of the non-existent “axis of evil.” And the last article he published before joining the Trump administration advocated military action against and regime change for North Korea.

While both Trump and Bolton are brutal men with the need to dominate others, their ambitions do not precisely coincide. Trump has few, if any, foreign policy successes to point to as he heads into next year’s determinative presidential election. Returning to “fire and fury” threats and the loss of even the façade of diplomacy would highlight the failure of his Korean initiatives. So, he needs to keep diplomacy alive, at least for another year and a half. This helps to explain his signaling that he remains open to a third summit and his decision to support food assistance as North Korea faces yet another catastrophic famine. However there has been no stepping back from his Bolton enforced all or nothing demands. So, openings – small though they may be - remain despite the Bolton-Pompeo hard liners having seized control of U.S. foreign and military policies.

There is also the sad and contradictory truth that, even as North Korea has nuclear weapons and Iran does not, Trump, Bolton and Pompeo are more committed to overthrowing the Islamic Republic in Teheran than to winning North Korean denuclearization. This may buy precious time here in Northeast Asia.

In the U.S., this leaves our movement focused on urging continued diplomacy, building support for Ro Kohana’s peace agreement legislation, finding ways to support President Moon’s peacemaking diplomacy, and acting in solidarity with peace and nuclear disarmament forces in Korea and beyond.

 Friends, as we strategize, we need to consider the changing lay of the land, to identify where our opponents are vulnerable, and where there are cracks in the belligerent systems and the stalemate that open opportunities. The challenges we face are not taking place in a vacuum. U.S. hegemony is on the defensive in the interregnum of post-Post-Cold War disorder. China has risen. It’s economic power and political influence extend into Europe, and it is increasingly seen at the United States single peer competitor. And, despite their relative declines, the U.S. and Russia’s remain great and terrifying powers with competing interests in Northeast Asia. Prime Minister Abe’s is campaigning to overturn Japan’s peace constitution, but he is being met by powerful popular resistance by Japanese who remember or have learned about the calamities of militarized nationalism. And the non-nuclear weapons states are increasing pressure on the nuclear nine with the Nuclear Weapons Prohibition Treaty. We thus find ourselves in a dynamic moment which holds the promise of finding new and possibly unexpected allies, as well as diplomatic alternatives to Bolton, Pompeo and Kim dictates.

 Koreans, and in different ways Japanese, have been sentenced by geopolitical realities and laws of geopolitics to live and to work for peace and security at the nexus of these forces. The inherent dangers of renewed great power tensions and the nuclear and high-tech arms races they have generated are obvious. But, **please** do not underestimate the opportunities this dynamic and uncertain moment provides. As we see with the Ban Treaty, insisting on life-affirming national policies, instead of compromising with the forces of militarism and repression. can create new political facts to which the powers that be must respond. In addition to the obvious need to insist on diplomacy, maintaining the freeze for freeze, and taking the next and important steps toward denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as we see in today’s Peace Forum, there other means of building resistance: developing allies, generating new ideas to end and prevent war. People-to-people exchanges, including scholars, educators, students, tourists, business men and women, and politicians we can weave the web of human relations that make the possibility of war unthinkable.

 More, as in today’s forum and related events, increasingly unified cross-national peace movements and our life-affirming policy alternatives can transform militarized political discourses and build the political power that lead governments to pursue diplomacy instead of war.

#  Angela Davis, the courageous African-American scholar and activist wrote that “I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.” With imagination and determination, this must be our resolve. Anything less than peace, the elimination of nuclear weapons – on the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere, and the presence of justice is unacceptable.

# We in the U.S. movement will continue to listen and will take many of our leads from and act in solidarity with our Korean and Japanese partners. In the immediate future, our priority will be pressing for renewed diplomacy, urging an end to the Korean War, and negotiating a Peace Agreement to replace the Armistice, removing the sanctions that impede the Korean peace process and denuclearization, and working for a nuclear-free world. With imagination and determination, we can overcome.