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THE CURRENT: Why has North Korea escalated tensions in the run-up to the Korean War anniversary?

Thursday, June 25, 2020

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita. June 25 marks the 70th anniversary of the start of the Korean War. An armistice brought a halt the military action, but since then, North Korea's relationship with South Korea and the West, particularly the US can perhaps be summed up as recurring cycles of engagement and escalation.

2020 has so far seen an increase in tensions, capped off last week when North Korea blew up the joint liaison office just inside its borders, which allowed officials from the north and the south to regularly meet and communicate. With us for an update on where things stand on the Korean peninsula is Jung Pak, the SK-Korea Foundation chair in Korea studies here at Brookings with our Center for East Asia Policy Studies. Jung, thanks for being here and talking to us.

PAK: Thanks for having me.

PITA: I am going to ask you for your thoughts on sort of the long view of the relationship with North Korea, but first I'd like to ask you to start with some more recent history. The liaison office, before its use as a diplomatic channel was for a while a site of economic cooperation for the north and the south. And while Kim Jong on has now come out this week and put something of a pause on the latest escalations, we're still in a very fraught moment. Can you encapsulate for us, how did we get to this point?

PAK: The North Koreans are clearly wanting to signal their displeasure with the Moon administration and South Korea. And the tension has been ratcheted up by the regime in the past several weeks, including really harsh vitriolic statements, really insulting statements coming from Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong. As part of this ratcheting up of tension that North Korea has been doing over the past several weeks, the threats included things like moving troops near the border area, increasing military drills, and last week of course they very dramatically and symbolically destroyed the liaison center that was opened in 2018 with much fanfare. You know, this is very symbolic in that this was supposed to mark the new era of inter-Korean cooperation; it was something that the Moon administration really wanted to push forward. And of course, it had been shut down back in January because of coronavirus, but this was where several dozens of inter-Korean dialogues had occurred on such a variety of different matters. So, the North Koreans blowing this up was a very dramatic way for North Korea to signal and to demonstrate its real displeasure with the Moon administration in South Korea.

And how did we get here? The liaison office, built in 2018, was built at the height of summit diplomacy when Kim Jong Un decided in early 2018 that he was going to pivot. And before that, Kim Jong Un had not met with any leaders of any state, and the only two outsiders that he had any significant contact with was Dennis Rodman the basketball player, and with sushi chef who used to work for his father. So, 2018 was the high point of what could be in inter-Korean ties, which had been essentially been frozen since Kim Jong Un came to power in late 2011. But after the summits fell apart and that summit

diplomacy between Kim Jong Un and President Trump didn't really bear much fruit for Kim or for the United States, for that matter, the talks, there's been a big stalemate in discussions on all different fronts, whether it's U.S.-North Korea and North Korea and South Korea. I think last week's blowing up of the liaison office really, really marks the end of North Korea's desire for engagement.

PITA: You mentioned that the failed summits between North Korea and the U.S. was a big instigator in the start of this disengagement, this downturn in the relationships. What else can you tell us about the relationship between North and South Korea, particularly absent the diplomacy with the U.S., how their relationship has turned? Why have things gone south between the two of them?

PAK: You know, I think we can't really divorce it from the relationship with the U.S., whether it's North Korea's relationship to the U.S. or South Korea's relationship to the U.S. I think, in effect, that the marginalization of South Korea really began when there was a direct channel between Trump and Kim. And that we have this extreme bilateralization of diplomacy in these two individuals. And so, Moon, because he can't unilaterally lift sanctions, he doesn't want to violate existing sanctions, there was very little that he could do. And because Kim Jong Un had this very direct channel to Trump, he didn't need anybody else. So, I think it's really hard to divorce it from that. But I also think that Kim is really disappointed and really angry at the Moon administration. There is this little bit of emotionalism that I sense here, this this anger at the Moon administration for over-promising what Moon can deliver in terms of Trump yielding on sanctions, economic projects, etc.

But I also think that there are non-external reasons for why North Korea has been ramping up the tension. There's some strong domestic drivers that we have to talk about and that is the coronavirus situation and North Korea's economy, which is not doing very well. So, I think there is an element of distraction and a domestic driver for Kim Jong Un to be doing these things that are heightening tension in the region.

PITA: How has North Korea been affected by the coronavirus? I know we don't always have a lot of information about internal affairs within North Korea. But what do we know about it?

PAK: The regime to this day says zero infections of coronavirus in the country. Not even deaths, right, we're talking about zero infections. And the regime has locked down its borders, has threatened to shoot people who are smuggling across the border, along the 900-mile border with China to prevent the spread. They've quarantined thousands of people, the regime media has been clear that they're disinfecting various public places, they shut down public sites and locations. And so, the regime has taken stringent measures to make sure that there isn't a wide spread of the coronavirus in the country, which would have been really devastating for the country if this had spread. But judging from what we see in regime media of unmasked officials, big meetings happening, that the regime seems very confident that it has things under control. That said, you see, you would see anecdotal information or reports trickling out of the country from various provinces, where 100 soldiers succumb to symptoms that look like coronavirus; so-and-so in this particular area of X province had fever-like illnesses. So, we don't know for sure how much testing is going on in North Korea, if they're able to identify whether any of these deaths could be attributed to coronavirus, but I think it would be safe to say that that North Korea almost certainly has coronavirus infections in the country. But for propaganda and other purposes, the Kim regime has been very strong and saying that there are zero infections and that, you know, if anything, it's business as usual.

PITA: Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, has been rising in prominence and visibility, particularly to outsiders in recent years and very much so this year as well, particularly. What is it that we should know about her, her role in her brother's regime, and especially, what sort of signal should we take from her heightened prominence this year?

PAK: I think that we really need to be paying attention to Kim Yo Jong. I think it's really interesting that that she has taken on such prominence, especially in the past few weeks as she has been the one given the megaphone on threatening South Korea. She's the one criticizing the Moon administration. She's the one ordering these military actions against South Korea. And I think that's really a fascinating development in how this regime is evolving.

She's not a newbie in the North Korean governance apparatus. She's been by her brother side for at least six years, as his deputy, as de facto chief of staff. She's everywhere, kind of lurking in the background: handing her brother a pen to sign X document, telling people where to sit, telling people where to go, holding his ashtray in Hanoi during the second summit with President Trump. So, she's always been there, but it's only in the past several weeks that she has really played this very public role in domestic and external media, which suggests to me that at a minimum, whether this is succession related or not, at a minimum, her brother wants her to have the military street creds. That the military is listening to her, that she can be as harsh as he can, that she's got the toughness that's in the Kim family genes. So, I think this is something to watch. I think it's premature to say that this is succession-related, but that Kim Jong Un wants his sister to have this experience and for others to recognize that and to fill this hole in her resume that had been left missing. While she's had government experience, she has had foreign policy experience in many ways because she's been there for the summits, she has the bloodline, but the military and the security apparatus, that kind of experience was very much absent on her resume. So, this is something that she's building with her brother's support.

PITA: Given the occasion this week of the historical anniversary, I do want to come back around and ask you for the historical view. I realize it's a little bit unfair to ask for any sort of encapsulation of 70 years of history in, you know, one or two minutes. But what for those of us who aren't experts in the in the Koreas, in the long history between the two countries and between both countries and the U.S., what's most important for us to understand about those relationships and the history there?

PAK: Yeah, we're marking the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War. And I think what we have to remember is how much the division of the country along the 38th parallel has affected everything. In terms of whether it's the economy, whether it's geopolitical security issues, but really the alliance as well. So, the division has really affected North Korea, it's affected South Korea, in terms of their national goals. Both Koreas see reunification as the meta goal; whether or not it's realistic at this point is moot, but this is something that always kind of weighs on the two Koreas. And that affects the alliance relationships in that it's hard for South Korea to focus on other issues. North Korea remains its singularly most important issue, whether it's denuclearization, inter-Korean economic projects, and everything else is secondary. And that butts against U.S. priorities such as countering a more aggressive China and regional security goals in general.

For North Korea -- one of the things that Korea experts, when we're looking at North Korea, is how much of that revolutionary, reunification-by-force zeal has Kim Jong Un adopted from his grandfather who started the Korean War on June 25 1950? How do the nuclear weapons and its increasing conventional weapons capabilities, how do they play into this meta goal of the North Korean regime? It's something that we have to be constantly vigilant about. So, I would say that the fact of division makes the Korean Peninsula a key national security issue and also makes this a tinderbox of potential conflict. And I think the latest with what North Korea has done, blowing up the liaison building and continuing to threaten the region really encapsulates how deeply entrenched and how intractable this problem is as a result of what happened 70 years ago.

PITA: All right. Jung, thanks very much for talking to us today about this.

PAK: Thanks, Adrianna.