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[Column] Yoon's talk of "anti-state forces" and an end-of-war declaration for Korea

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Is there any reason to think that off-the-cuff remarks about "anti-state forces" will actually contribute to a national security policy based on a national consensus?



President Yoon Suk-yeol gives a commemorative address on July 27 at a ceremony in Busan's Haeundae District to mark Korean War UN Veterans Day and the 70th anniversary of the armistice that ended the hostilities of the Korean War. (Yonhap)



By Moon Chung-in, Yonsei University professor emeritus

This past Thursday marked 70 years since the cessation of hostilities on the Korean Peninsula. Article 4, Paragraph 60, of the Armistice Agreement that was signed on July 27, 1953, recommended that the countries on both sides hold a political conference within three months of the agreement being signed and taking effect "to settle through negotiation the questions of the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Korea [and] the peaceful settlement of the Korean question."

Despite that recommendation, the political conference ended in failure, and war on the Korean Peninsula technically still continues today. It may well be the longest-running internecine conflict in the world — a truly unfortunate situation.

There are a variety of viewpoints about the 70th anniversary of the Korean armistice. Some members of Korean society call for adopting an end-of-war declaration to transition from the ceasefire agreement to a peace treaty. Those people think that ending this 70-year war is both the mandate of history and a sensible step for our era.

In Washington, DC, the Peace on the Korean Peninsula Act, which calls for the official termination of the Korean War, was introduced to the US House of Representatives on the 70th anniversary of the end of hostilities. The bill is sponsored by US Rep. Brad Sherman (D-CA), who recently joined several leaders of the Korean American community to set up a group supporting the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration's call for an end-of-war declaration. The group advocates improving inter-Korean relations, easing military tensions, creating a permanent peace regime, denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula and improving North Korea-US relations.

But the South Korean government, under President Yoon Suk-yeol, has placed more focus on the 70th anniversary of the South Korea-US alliance than on the 70th anniversary of the Korean armistice. According to the Yoon administration, officially ending the war or reaching a peace treaty with North Korea is meaningless so long as the North possesses nuclear weapons, which leaves military deterrence against the North and a stronger alliance with the US as the only realistic options.

Yoon has a particularly hostile view of an end-of-war declaration. During opening remarks before project briefings by the Foreign Ministry and Defense Ministry on Jan. 11, Yoon declared that "a peace that depends on an end-of-war declaration and the good intentions of the other side is a false peace that would be unsustainable." Then during an address commemorating the establishment of the Korea Freedom Federation on June 28, the president criticized "anti-state forces" for "prating on about an end-of-war declaration that would dismantle the UN Command and begging the UN Security Council to lift sanctions against the North Korean communist gang even as it upgrades its nuclear arsenal."

There are two serious issues with Yoon's criticism; the first concerns objective facts.

The Panmunjom Declaration on April 27, 2018, following up on the declaration made at the inter-Korean summit in 2007, called for adopting an end-of-war declaration within the year and working to convert the armistice agreement into a peace agreement while also proactively organizing three-party or four-party talks toward the same goal. This language was based on the fundamental assumption — in place since the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement — that an end-of-war declaration would serve as a main starting point for building a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

That point is made even clearer by the draft end-of-war declaration that the Biden administration in the US and the administration of former South Korean President Moon Jae-in approved in mid-2021. The end-of-war declaration would have been a political and symbolic declaration that war is over on the Korean Peninsula and an expression of the commitment to use that declaration as an opportunity to break through the current deadlock in the denuclearization talks.

And since the adoption of an end-of-war declaration and the transition from the armistice arrangement to a peace treaty would take a long time, that draft appears to have been based on maintaining the current armistice system and the UN Command until a peace regime is completed on the Korean Peninsula.

In addition, the Moon administration didn't unilaterally ask the UN Security Council to lift its sanctions on North Korea, but instead proposed applying those sanctions more flexibly, based on the principle of reciprocity, to achieve the goal of denuclearization. Calling that a "false peace" can only be explained as a failure to fully understand the matter at hand or a deliberate distortion of it.

The second issue is the ideological black-and-white thinking implicit in Yoon's remarks. What he said suggests that the people who seek to use an end-of-war declaration to achieve a peace regime and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula are in fact "anti-state forces" who want to topple "free Korea." While it may be true that Korea's presidential system is a winner-takes-all arrangement, it hardly seems reasonable to denounce policies that were adopted by the previous administration and supported by a substantial number of voters and political groups as being inimical to the state.

On a fundamental level, the president's authority is delegated by the people, and his duty is to establish and execute foreign policy and national security policy through a national consensus. Invoking us-and-them dichotomies and vilifying his adversaries as a means of rallying the base will have the effect of damaging not only the system of deliberative democracy but ultimately national security itself.

Criticizing the previous administration is to be expected, but that criticism needs to be grounded in the historical context and the facts. That's the only way to find an empirical solution that will serve the broader interest.

Is there any reason to think that off-the-cuff remarks about "anti-state forces" will actually contribute to a national security policy based on a national consensus?

Rewarding supporters, expanding support among moderates, and minimizing opposing forces are the essential traits of successful leadership in democratic politics. The Yoon administration's success surely depends upon that as well.

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