

## **Panmunjom Regime: a Global Historical Exploration for Peace as Social Solidarity**

Kim Hak-Jae, *The Origins of the Panmunjom Regime: The Korean War and Liberal Peace Projects*, Humanitas, 2015

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### **1. A New Paradigm for Looking At the Korean War and the Division of the Peninsula**

Today, Panmunjom is a symbolic place that revives the memories and the pain of the Korean War, and is embedded in the minds of the general public as a place that justifies the legitimacy of 70 years of national division and more than 60 years of an armistice. How did the antagonistic divisionist regime form on the Peninsula and how did the people living on it build increasingly stronger ‘wall of the mind’? Until now, these questions were answered, most of the time, within the frame of preparing and going to ‘war’ and then perpetuating the state of an ‘armistice’. So, the ruling elite of both South and North Korea would always say they want peace but then compel people to antagonistically remember the past war and make preparations for a war that may start any time soon, and thereby control and consolidate the regime. But would it be possible to look at the nature of the divisionist regime and the Korean War, symbolized by Panmunjom, from a new

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perspective, that of inquiring the 'origin of peace' rather than 'origin of war'? The author of this book develops such inquiry and systematically analyzes the process of the Korean War. As a conclusion, he goes on to propose 'peace as a form of solidarity', based on the ideas of Durkheim.

The book, which is also the PhD thesis of Kim Hak Jae, a post-doctorate researcher at the Free University Berlin Graduate School of East Asian Studies, looks at the Korean War from a broader perspective and is viewed by others to be proposing a paradigm to reinterpret why division persists. From the standpoint of global history, the author extracts from the activities and international laws of the United Nations and also from modern liberal projects, the trends of the Korean War and features of a divisionist regime. As he points out, the United States and the United Nations have forgotten the Korean War, however, in order to overcome the armistice and the divisionist regime, consolidated by the Korean War, we must continue communicating with our contemporary world, including our neighboring countries. Of course, the author argues that in order to converse with the world, we must be able to go beyond the frame of national history and re-formulate this issue from a global history point of view, which involves understanding the world's major trends in a holistic context. Such an argument by the author can provide us with a new breakthrough in researching the Korean War and political history as well as with an innovative perspective on how to overcome the division of the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, the author does not limit such view of the Korean War to re-interpreting only Peninsula-related issues. I personally read the book under expectations that it could be used as a proactive platform on which to break the deadlock in East Asian international order amidst intensifying conflict between Korea, China and Japan, and to build actual cooperation and peace.

I believe the reason why the project 'origin of peace' is important rather than 'origin of war' is, more than anything else, because it allows us to reflect simultaneously on the past, present and the future. These attempts of the author enable us to view the Korean War not as past history that hardly exerts any influence on 'newly' interpreting the continuity of our way of life and regimes of today, but rather as an ongoing issue and a realistic task through which we can hope for a peaceful future. This research is quite worthy of the praise that

it lays down the foundation for a new paradigm, by allowing us to further develop the first generation research that focused on the origin, evolution and results of the Korean War, to understand where within the sphere of influence of modern liberal projects lies the results of the Korean War, and also to generate new ideas on how to find the juncture between world history and Korean history in the 20th century. Indeed, it is because the book fosters expectation and vision on these points that the challenging and lucid PhD thesis of this young researcher has won accolades from many prominent scholars.

## 2. Characteristics of the ‘Panmunjom Regime’ and Tasks to be Accomplished

The author overturns one of the core bases of the Asia Paradox, which is the ‘Korean War military armistice regime’, and refers to the threat of war, symbolized by ‘Panmunjom’, as the ‘Panmunjom regime, a special form of peace regime’. It is a strategy to overturn the meaning behind ‘Panmunjom’, the representative relic of the Cold War, and rethink in the direction of overcoming what already exists. In other words, the ever continuing ‘Panmunjom regime’ seems, on the surface, to advocate an armistice, but in fact, it is a peculiar peace project created by liberal forces of the West intervening in Peninsula issues. In this sense, the term was deduced by the author in order to discuss his idea that the Korean War has not ended but instead has merely temporarily paused and to explain that “The reality of the Korean Peninsula, where Cold War antagonism has been preserved for more than 60 years, is indeed historically a rare phenomena.” The concept is also a theoretical foundation to link the dilemmas of national history to the context of world history. In other words, it is a mechanism to position a unique historical example within the universal world history.

As such, in order to find a juncture between Korean history and world history, and also to be able to explain to the world the Korean War and the armistice perpetuating division on the Peninsula, the author uses a form of a universal conceptualization strategy. According to the author, non-Koreans find it difficult to properly grasp

concepts such as Paik Nak-Chung's 'division system' or Park Myung-Lim's '1953 regime'. So the book highlights the importance of re-interpreting Korea's armistice system with international laws and organizations as 'common ground'. In this sense, the 'Panmunjom regime (1953)' is comparable with 'Geneva regime (1954)' and the 'Bandung regime (1955)'. They all started as local and unique 'examples' with proper nouns in their names, however, underneath lies a certain context of world history - namely, "modern liberalism becoming deformed and a Cold War regime being established". Of course, the author is not trying to replace 'national history' with 'global history' but rather to complement it. This is because it is important for us to go beyond merely asking 'why did we have to go through a war' and instead ask 'why do we still take it for granted that we live under an armistice, which is an extension of war?'. To be able to ask such a question, we need to form a theoretical basis for the two questions to meet and share.

In this regard, the author identifies the 'Panmunjom regime' to be yet another peace regime created by the Cold War, just as the 'Westphalian regime' and the 'Versailles/San Francisco regime' were established within European history through wars. Kim suggests that the reason why the Panmunjom regime still continues today is because of a turn in US's international strategy. In the beginning of the Cold War, the US implemented a 'Hobbesian peace project', which is about using its dominating power to contain wars, however, nowadays, because of the concern that it may be overtaken by China, the US is switching to a 'Kantian peace project', emphasizing international laws and regulations. To illustrate, the author cites the example the UN convention limiting and jointly managing export of 'conventional weapons'. The treaty was initiated by the US, which is in fact, the world's largest exporter and provider of weapons, and 118 countries signed onto the convention in April 2013. Basically, the intention of the US is that it wants to pull itself out of the quagmire of an excessively costly conventional warfare and instead maintain its hegemony over international order by developing state-of-the-art unmanned weaponry and using its overwhelming clout over information, and thereby contain China by also using, where appropriate, Kantian methods as well.

Against this backdrop, the Panmunjom regime also stands firm and continues,

albeit some turbulence, due to “The attitudes of the US, which agreed to the agreement, North Korea, which disagreed, and China, which abstained to the UN convention”. As was the case during the war, the Korean Peninsula, still prone to extreme friction, remains a place where the complex interests of neighboring nation states conflict and collide. Therefore, the Panmunjom regime is a ‘contradictory regime’, maintaining itself within a peculiar relationship of conflict and coexistence between a peace-seeking Kantian project and a Hobbesian project. The author emphasizes, “The regime is a result of international laws as well as planning and negotiating by international organizations and various countries, and it still persists because unsolved issues have been left neglected, even now.”

The author then goes on to conclude that the characteristics of the Panmunjom regime are as follows. Firstly, the regime is a “temporary military armistice - unstable and volatile”, and has continued for the last 60 years. The Panmunjom regime is neither an order created by balance between state powers, nor is it anywhere near even an incomplete peace treaty signed as a compromise between related parties. It is simply a regime that has been maintained based on the obsession of interests the neighboring superpowers had gained through the previous order. Secondly, it is a “regime of narrow military alliance, lacking international universality”. The Panmunjom regime is the result of a military alliance that was formed to prevent further war of attrition, after both the authority of a Kantian international federation and an order based on the power of the Hobbesian world state had failed. Thirdly, it is a “Cold War-style anti-communist liberal regime”, fetishizing liberal institutions. It was created not by liberalism as a political ideology and governing principle of a republic, but rather by ultra-right liberalism, whereby the regime upholds itself as a superior form of civilization while all counter and alternative ideologies are excluded through a civilization/barbarism dichotomy. Fourthly, it is an “apolitical, militaristic and economic order that avoided and deferred demands of the East Asian society”. Under the Panmunjom regime, various disputes and contradictions that had emerged during the Korean War, such as the various post-colonial issues arising after liberation and other post-war challenges, have been completely disregarded without being resolved through a democratic political process. These pending issues were simply

supplanted by bilateral relations based on specific functions, namely, militaristic and economic functions. Lastly, the regime is a “symbol of divided peace and of a special developmentalist project”. The Panmunjom regime does not seek universal peace and justice. Instead, it is a very limited form of peace involving collusion between militaries of the two counterparts and accelerates an antagonistic and rigid rivalry between different systems.

These characteristics of the Panmunjom regime, a result of the Korean War, reaffirm the fact that the regime is neither of the two peace-building models within Western liberalism - one being the Kantian stable and permanent peace regime and other being the Hobbesian incomplete peace treaty based on compromise between states. In other words, it is a regime based neither on the ‘authority’ of an international federation nor on the ‘power’ of a dominant state. Thus, the Panmunjom regime differs from Europe’s universal international order, and is the basis of the unique nature of East Asia today, referred to by the author as the ‘East Asian Paradox’ - the expansion and reproduction of an “unstable power balance prevalent throughout the entire region”. What, then, should we set as the aims of our praxis in trying to transform the presently unstable, narrow and temporary state of peace into a more complete peace regime, and overcome the Panmunjom regime that consolidates division on the Peninsula? The author proposes the following five points.

“First, the Panmunjom regime, as a temporary military armistice, must break free from its negative meaning of the absence of fighting and move toward a proactive peace regime by gaining a positive meaning - that is aims for peace and alleviation of antagonism. Second, a joint security body must be set up in order to control an arms race between the competitive military alliances. Third, an East Asian consultation system based on broad consensus is needed, going beyond the apolitical and unilateral San Francisco regime. Fourth, both the antagonistic and exclusive Cold War liberal system and exclusive nationalism must be avoided. Finally, the universality of peace and justice must be upheld in place of exceptionalism and struggles for recognition.”

### 3. Overcoming Division of the Peninsula, Toward Actual Peace in East Asia

Based on such an understanding, the author argues that the new criteria of peace to be sought today should neither be the Kantian model of relying on the authority of existing international laws and organizations, nor the Hobbesian model of emphasizing security and power games to counter a civil war. The peace strategy we now need is “social peace that forms relationships and a society through exchange and contact, overcomes structural inequalities in relationships and thereby seeks to reach the value of social justice”. Kim Hak-Jae emphasizes that the Panmunjom regime, until now, was able to maintain itself through the ‘absence of authority’, but that it is now high time for us to move beyond the deceptive liberal ideology and focus on the concept of ‘solidarity’ as asserted by Durkheim. In short, “Social solidarity, which develops as society facilitates internal division of labor, should have priority over building a strong state or legislating universal international laws.” A transition has to be made, from ‘politico-philosophical considerations’, which interprets problems as those pertaining from conflict and peace among countries, to ‘socio-philosophical reflections’, which seeks to generate peace within the society. In this sense, Durkheim believed that complex conflicts of modern society cannot be resolved through either nationalism or other forms of collectivity where individuals are rallied together, or through individualism emphasizing human dignity. If organizations in solidarity sufficiently come into contact with one another, continue the process of communication and form common regulations, then a state of ‘anomie’ will not appear.

This new peace strategy, taken from Durkheim, who premised a condition naturally calling for complete peace by strengthening society’s internal solidarity, discloses how much ‘peace’ of the Panmunjom regime resulting from the Korean War was anti-social and anti-solidaristic. Therefore, ultimately, the author asserts, “We need to switch from seeking peace through liberalism towards seeking peace through social solidarity.” Of course, such a transition does not come about only by ending the Korean War and overcoming the division of the Korean Peninsula.

It is enabled also by establishing an Asian solidarity network. The solutions suggested by the author, based on the ideas of Durkheim, lead us to the conclusion that the Panmunjom regime of today is perpetuated because solidarity between states and social solidarity within states are simultaneously being destroyed and because social solidarity has completely broken down internationally and regionally. I also agree to the author's arguments. My hopes are that if leaders of South and North Korea share this kind of perception, then the two Koreas will be able to surpass the ideological, institutional and subconscious division and approach genuine unification, and the entire unification process will contribute to establishing peace in East Asia and the world at large, and thereby stimulate change.

Clearly, the United Nations, though it was one of the main players in the international deployment of troops and the negotiations for a ceasefire, it has neglected the unstable nature of the regime for more than 60 years. As the author pointed out in an interview, although a Korean national sits as the secretary general, there has been no official interpretation aiming to build peace in the East Asian region from the UN regarding Korea's armistice negotiations, let alone collection of related material for later research and international activities. Therefore, in light of the fact that the US still exerts immense influence over international relations and also the ever-intensifying competition over hegemony between the US and China, it is questionable whether the only way for Korea is to depend on 'resolving the issue through the UN'. This is because of the reality that one can only be quite concerned that even in the future, Korea may have to continue sitting on the fence between the US and China, and simply hope for a peace regime to be built on the Peninsula while becoming subordinated under the yoke of yet another form of international relations.

On the other hand, the author shows concern that "The negative legacies embodied by the Panmunjom regime as a result of its reluctance 'to strive for universal peace and universal justice' may become permanent". However, I think otherwise. Regarding the issue of the Korean Peninsula, the problem is not so much that Korea lacks universal perception on Asian values and institutions, but that even after the end of the Cold War, the mainstream academia has maintained rather



a narrow perspective, reluctant to independently interpret and critically reconstruct Korean political and diplomatic history. When it comes to viewing the Korean Peninsula, at one end of the spectrum, there are those who excessively adopt, as the universal view, an US-centric, US-dependent perspective while on the other side, there are those who establish, as a counter discourse, excessively accumulated nationalistic perspective. Ultimately, in order for a transformative historical awareness to converge with practicable aims of states, there are still many issues related to harmonizing universality with specificity that have to be solved. Obviously, there is a concern that trying to overcome the limitations of ‘specificity’ and seeking ‘universality’ in order to expand the issues to a global level may lead to entrapment in yet another type of subordinative perspective, and such a concern is not limited to research on the Korean War. In fact, it is related to the issue of defining ‘modernity’. The tragedy of ‘modernity’ that we had experienced and this arduous history emanating from that tragedy and continuing until today are not merely the results of our nation state being incomplete and political agents being incapable. They are, in fact, closely linked to tragically complex historical contradictions that are innate within Western rationality. Such realization, I believe, will become a very important stimulation for Korea’s future generations in their imagination of peace that they seek within global solidarity.

In the end, through the window of the ‘Panmunjom regime’, we can revisit the origin of the political, social and cultural ideology that was used to sustain each system in the South and the North of the Peninsula, which celebrates its 70th anniversary of Korea’s liberation and national division this year. Succinctly put, the regime of division established by the South and the North is the result of the two Koreas depending on and living off the Panmunjom regime - a strange international order which has already been identified as a failure of then modern liberal paradigm. As can be seen through the War Memorial Museum, sitting in central Seoul, the two states on the Korean Peninsula until now have been commemorating war instead of peace and have been sustaining the existing system by relying on politics of fear and hate, and security. The starting point of a genuine ‘universal vision’ for leaders and peoples of the two Koreas is surmounting the ‘antagonistic coexistence’ between the two Koreas, which takes for granted peace

as a form of a mask of war, and realizing that the issue of the Korean Peninsula is not one of filling in an 'income statement on economics of unification' but rather one of building international peace.