

Who is the enemy when it comes to Northeast Asia? What are the reasons for such perceptions? And what exactly are the implications for fostering future peace in the region?

As with many conflicts in the world, the answer to those questions depends a lot on which city you're currently sitting in.

Since the Korean war ended in July 1953 with an armistice – not a peace treaty – an unfinished state of war has continued to cast its shadow over the peninsula and beyond. Over 60 years since the armistice was signed, a formal peace treaty between the two Koreas remains distant in sight, militarization of the peninsula high, and serious efforts to resolve the perpetual state of conflict depressingly low.

Although the conflict originally fit into the wider division of the Cold War – with the USSR and China backing communist North and U.S. and Western allies backing the South – evolving geopolitical circumstances have changed how the “enemy” is perceived by some in Northeast Asia. While Moscow and Beijing once backed North Korea to the point where diplomatic and economic relations with the South would have been unimaginable, China has become South Korea's largest trading partner and, despite some recent differences, Russia's relations with South Korea have been growing since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Yet for their part, relations between North Korea, the U.S. and South Korea have changed little since the Korean war. Undisputably, the U.S. is still enemy number one in North Korea, with “puppet” South Korea not far behind. While the level of vitriol levied towards the North is less evident in South Korean discourse, even considering diplomatic overtures like the decade of Sunshine policy which once sought to engage Kim Jong Il's leadership, North Korea is still technically the primary enemy for the South. And for Washington – not just as protector of South Korea but also cognizant about longer term threats North Korea can pose to its own American shores – the DPRK remains the principal threat it publicly faces in the region.

But while the lingering security implications of the unfinished Korean War are certainly at the heart of this ongoing situation, are they the only things that today prevents serious changes in the way these three countries view each other? A look at what's contributing to policy would suggest otherwise.

For Pyongyang's hereditary family dictatorship, which is increasingly sensitive of the degree to which South Korea's economy has eclipsed its own and fearful of information drifting North, the unfinished state of “war” with the U.S. and South Korea has numerous benefits.

Firstly, while not *officially* targeting the general economy, sanctions imposed by the U.S. are often used by the government to explain to its people the poor state of the North Korean economy, its dilapidated infrastructure and shuttered heavy industry. Secondly, the military threat the U.S. and South Korea poses also helps explain North Korea's immense resource allocation in the military, justifying huge expenses in the areas of nuclear and ballistic missile development that could otherwise plug holes in much-needed budgetary areas like health, food security and welfare. Finally, the ideological threat that external information poses the leadership has been used to justify a decades long external media blackout, limits on the freedom of movement, and the rationale for a significant degree of political persecution.

In short, for these three reasons and many more, the designation of the U.S. and South Korea as enemies of the North Korean state serves the Pyongyang leadership innumerable benefits, without which the Kim family might have found themselves in trouble long ago. As such, it's no surprise that extremely negative propaganda about the U.S. and South Korean leadership can be found on posters, TV broadcasts, newspapers, and even artwork throughout North Korea.

While South Korea officially views North Korea as an enemy of the state, hostility towards the North is normally much less pointed in both official and public discourse emanating from the South. Yet, as with the North, the unresolved state of conflict and designation of the DPRK as an enemy has some of its own set of indirect advantages, not just for the government but wider society, too.

Perhaps the most notable benefits to maintaining the status quo – which is not spoken about often in public – relates to the issue of unification. While ostensibly both Koreas long to reunify, the reality is that such a process would create serious and destabilizing problems for both countries in the short-term. From the Northern perspective, political elites rightly worry about their future role – if any – in a unified Korean system. But from the Southern perspective both the general public and government alike fret more – for valid reasons – about the myriad of costs associated with unifying with the North.

In short, decades of division have led to two drastically different Koreas, and as a result, unification has been estimated to cost South Korea significantly more than it did for Western Germany to absorb the East. As such, increasing apathy towards the topic of unification is commonplace in South Korea, with younger generations far more worried about their own economic futures than that of their erstwhile North Korean cousins. The thinking goes that if accepting a single refugee already costs South Korean society a minimum \$100,000, how much would it cost to modernize and integrate a country of 25 million people?

As a result, it seems that unless a major change in thinking about the benefits of unification takes place among South Korean society, it will be hard to imagine circumstances any time soon that would facilitate a radical change in approach towards the North. Far from a breakthrough in relations that could lead to unification, it's more likely that we can expect a continuation of the stop-start inter-Korean politics that have become the norm in recent years, with South Korean politicians understandably hesitant to risk upsetting their constituencies.

From the U.S. perspective, the unresolved nature of the Korean war and North Korea's role as an enemy in political and military discourse might not on the surface appear to be much in Washington's interest. Indeed, beyond the human costs suffered by the U.S. military through its own participation in the 1950-53 war, the financial costs of guaranteeing South Korean security have ever since been significant. And of course, North Korea's evolving military capacities will credibly threaten U.S. interests not just in the Asia Pacific, but contiguous American territory before long if things do not change, something that could one day have catastrophic consequences.

But it would be naive to consider the view of North Korea as an enemy of the U.S. as something completely negative for Washington. Not only serving as a reason to once station significant weaponry on the Soviet Union's doorstep for much of the Cold War, the Korean theater continues to serve a similar role, today serving as a convenient place from which to discourage Chinese or Russian aggression and expansionism in the east. Alongside its troops in Japan, the U.S. presence in Korea also serves as a strategic location to project American power in the border region, in addition to helping secure South Korea – an important trading partner and buyer of U.S. military equipment – from the threat of North Korea's conventional and non-conventional military power. As such, it's no wonder a key question for many U.S. officials concerned with the region is the possible impact of unification on Washington's longer-term capacity to use the peninsula as a base to project power in Asia. Indeed, without the threat of North Korea to justify its presence, would the citizens of a unified Korea continue to welcome the presence of an occupying foreign force?

For these and many other reasons, it is clear that a grand solution to the decades long Korean conflict continues to remain far from sight. Unfortunately, until the contradictions among the many interests of the stakeholders most concerned with Korea can be overcome and credible negotiations to end the war can begin, a risk of unintended and potentially serious conflict will prevail over the peninsula.