

Repatriation Politics: US-North Korea Relations and the Repatriation of American Soldiers' Remains

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This paper focuses on the political dynamic between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) through the lens of the repatriation of US soldiers' bodies after the Korean War. The intense, hostile relationship between the two ideological foes is reflected by the degree of success of US repatriation efforts throughout the decades after the Korean War. By utilizing primary and secondary sources, this paper discusses past repatriation efforts of American soldiers' bodies to reflect the relationship dynamic between the United States and North Korea by extensively analyzing three specific repatriation effort timeframes and the contexts surrounding the efforts. The three time periods to be discussed are (1) the period directly after the Korean War Armistice was signed, (2) the late 1990s, when diplomatic relations were attempted, and (3) in 2018, when former US President Donald Trump met with North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un. By using these three time periods as insights to the North Korean-United States relationship dynamic, this paper argues that the most opportune time for the United States to begin repatriation efforts is when North Korea is experiencing overwhelming financial difficulties or increased international pressure. The goal of this paper is to provide insight into the North Korean and American antagonistic relationship by detailing the background on the topic and contributing a unique analysis of the past, present, and future repatriation efforts between the two adversaries.

Introduction

There are thousands of Americans in what is arguably the most internationally isolated, anti-American nation in the world—North Korea. These Americans are the approximately 5,300 soldiers who perished during the Korean War and continue to remain above the 38th parallel.¹ Tense diplomatic relations have made the return of these soldiers' bodies to the United States difficult. Efforts to recover, return, and put to rest these Americans have been attempted every decade since the end of the Korean War in 1953. This paper will examine how past repatriation efforts of American soldiers' bodies reflect the relationship dynamics between the United States and North Korea by extensively analyzing three specific repatriation effort timeframes and the contexts surrounding the efforts. These are (1) the period directly after the Korean War Armistice was signed, (2) the late 1990s, when diplomatic relations were attempted, and (3) in 2018, when former US President Donald Trump met with North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un. Focusing on the context of relationship dynamics surrounding these repatriation efforts will give insight into the likelihood of success for future US repatriation efforts with North Korea while highlighting the intersection of the United States' nationalism, international position, and memories of war.

The extensive amount of funds, time, and logistical support for repatriation is no small effort, especially seeing that most countries other than the United States do not dedicate similar resources to return perished soldiers' bodies. Efforts of utilizing all available military, diplomatic, and civil resources to ensure that soldiers' bodies can be returned to US soil first began after public outcry in response to the large American death toll of World War I.² From then on, the United States has either (1) established "meticulously maintained" American cemeteries on foreign soil or (2) repatriated soldiers' bodies so that they can be buried in the United States.³ These efforts reflect the unique mentality of the United States that no American should be "left behind." This has been institutionalized by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, a Department of Defense sub-agency that aims to "keep the promise to bring home the men and women who become isolated in harm's way."⁴ Because most foreign soil cemeteries and memorials were created in the early-to-mid twentieth century after the World Wars and symbolize some sort of allyship with the host country, this paper will solely focus on repatriation efforts, for they are more relevant when discussing the

Korean War and the tense diplomatic relations between North Korea and the United States. After providing a brief background of repatriation efforts thus far, this paper argues that based on past interactions with North Korea, the most opportune time for the United States to begin repatriation efforts is when North Korea is experiencing overwhelming financial hardships or increasing international pressure. This is because North Korea recognizes the United States' ardent desire to repatriate its soldiers' bodies and sees these repatriation efforts as a bargaining chip to achieve their respective goals.

There is currently little to no academic literature discussing this specific intersection in international relations—most either focus mostly on general US policy toward North Korea or US repatriation during other wars. In view of this, this paper hopes to provide insight into the US-North Korea adversarial relationship detailing the background on the topic and offering a unique analysis of past, present, and future repatriation efforts between the two adversaries.

Methodology

This paper utilized primary and secondary resources to establish a comprehensive background of the contexts and circumstances of relations between the United States and North Korea since the Korean War. Research institutions and portals have provided a clear amount of appropriate and accessible sources for this research paper that have allowed the author to map and contextualize repatriation efforts thus far. More specifically, sources from the United States government, academic institutions, and news organizations are used to examine how repatriation efforts during these selected time periods have been perceived by previous government officials, scholars, and commentators.

The core discussion and analysis of this paper used news coverage and government sources of these repatriation efforts to compare across time periods and to contextualize the repatriation efforts. Since US support for repatriation efforts is based on public expectations and perceptions of the US government duty, obtaining contextualization sources from the news coverage of the selected periods proved crucial in truly understanding what is expected from the US government. Additionally, the government sources directly provided information on what the US government perceives as their responsibility and how it tries to deliver on said responsibility. Various sources from

the government, media, non-profit organizations, and the academe were used for background information. The author of this paper acknowledges that the sources used are limited and mostly Western-centric. From the initial literature review, it became apparent that information on this topic would be not easily accessible or available which makes it difficult not to lean toward the Western point of view. Nonetheless, the author believes that these sources are relevant when forming a foundation for understanding a topic that attempts to encapsulate approximately seven decades of history between the United States and North Korea.

Background of Repatriation Efforts

The United Nations' military intervention led by the United States in support of South Korea in 1950 resulted in North Korea cutting off most diplomatic ties with the Western world, especially the United States. Even 70 years after the end of the Korean War, US presence is still largely felt on the Korean Peninsula given that Washington remains the strongest military, economic, and political ally of Seoul. However, despite the lack of normalized diplomatic relations between North Korea and the United States, some successful repatriation efforts have occurred—returning hundreds of American soldiers' remains to the US while also forming a (strained) relationship between Washington and Pyongyang.

Additionally, for the sake of this paper, it is important to recognize that there is a unique social contract between the United States' government and its citizens regarding the repatriation of soldiers' remains. US citizens, especially those associated with the military, expect that those who perish abroad while serving in the military will be brought back to American soil. This is largely due to the "leave no man behind" mentality that has engrained itself into American military and social culture, thus perpetuating the idea that American soldiers, even if deceased, should not be "left behind" in a foreign country.⁵ Through literature, cinema, and other forms of popular media, the mantra "leave no man behind" has grown so prominent in American culture that the idea to repatriate soldiers is rarely put into question, regardless of the military operation's popularity or public approval. This mentality, combined with a century of precedents, has made many Americans consider the repatriation of American soldiers' remains as a national duty that must be performed to commemorate the soldiers' and their families' efforts and sacrifice. This social contract between the government

and its citizens is perhaps most evident by the great diplomatic and economic commitments and sacrifices the United States makes to ensure the safe repatriation of their soldiers' remains despite receiving little tangible political or economic gains domestically or internationally.

1953-1954: The 38th Parallel, the Armistice Agreement, and "Operation Glory"

In 1953, the Korean Armistice Agreement officially suspended all hostilities between North and South Korea—establishing the 38th Parallel as the divider between the two Koreas. The end of the three-year conflict left millions of civilians and soldiers dead, including over 30,000 American troops and an estimated hundreds of thousands of North Korean soldiers.⁶ While most of the perished soldiers were accounted for and/or recovered during the war on their respective sides of the 38th Parallel, UN officials and communist forces (i.e., USSR and China) agreed to repatriate any remains they currently had or would find in the future. Some of the perished soldiers were found in mass graves while others were buried in unidentified, makeshift graves often in the form of foxholes or shell holes.⁷ Therefore, extensive logistical effort and manpower were required to recover the missing bodies of the fallen soldiers on the Korean Peninsula. The period of 1953-1954, often referred to as "Operation Glory", saw the largest exchange of perished soldiers' remains across the 38th Parallel.

The Americans spearheaded "Operation Glory" in the direct aftermath of the Korean War when both South and North Korea were physically, financially, and socially devastated. In North Korea, thousands of structures were decimated and both the industrial and agricultural outputs were reduced by well over half.⁸ South Korea had also fallen equally in status and socioeconomic conditions. Therefore, the support of the Soviet Union and China in North Korea and the support of the United States and the United Nations in South Korea became especially crucial directly after the hostilities ended and remained present long after the fighting ended. In particular, during and especially after the war, the United Nations and the United States' Quartermaster Graves Registration Committee—a US military unit solely dedicated to mortuary affairs—took special interest in not only accounting for the dead, but in returning them to their home country.⁹ After three meetings with North Korea to discuss the logistics of this mass repatriation effort, 4,167 South Korean and UN

soldiers' remains were returned to South Korea or to their respective countries, while 13,528 communist forces were returned to North Korea. "Operation Glory" efforts ended with a final repatriation of 66 soldiers on November 9, 1954 when North Korea claimed they had no more remains to return to the United Nations forces. Both sides promised that they will repatriate any bodies within a month of discovering them.¹⁰

1996-2005: Attempts at Normalizing Relations

The 1990s was a turbulent time on the Korean Peninsula. The end of the Cold War and the fall of the USSR in 1991 led to North Korea receiving less financial and social international support. Furthermore, a famine, referred to as the "Arduous March", exacerbated the daily struggles of North Korean citizens. An estimated three million North Koreans died within the span of four years (1994-1998) which led to one of the largest social turmoils recorded in a totalitarian dictatorship. In an unprecedented move, North Korea officially asked the international community for food aid in 1995.¹¹

From 1990 to 1994, North Korea unilaterally returned 208 caskets to the United States. Due to the nature of the remains, many of which were "commingled" and indistinguishable, there could be up to 400 remains repatriated during this time.¹² However, it was not until 1996 that repatriation efforts became bilateral. Starting in the midst of the "Arduous March", the United States and North Korea conducted 36 joint field activities that resulted in the repatriation of 20 identified American remains and 204 other remains. Joint field activities involved both North Korea and United States personnel to search for, recover, and repatriate remains. No other United Nations country was involved in these repatriation efforts. While technically the Secretary of Defense was not authorized to pay for remains or information regarding soldiers' remains, the US Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office "reimbursed" North Korea approximately \$15 million for these repatriation efforts during this period.¹³ However, in 2005, these efforts were halted after a Pentagon spokesman said the "environment [was] uncondusive to the continued presence of American personnel in North Korea"—mostly referring to the immensely strict management of communications and movement of the American personnel.¹⁴ Rising tension over North Korea's growing nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs was another reason for the suspension of these operations. The repatriation

efforts of this period are the only operations that are considered joint field activities.

2018: The Trump Administration and Kim Jong-Un

In 2018, former US President Donald Trump, known for deviating from the political precedent set by his predecessors, fulfilled a 2016 presidential campaign promise to meet with North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, who has led North Korea since 2011. Since the death of Kim Jong-il, North Korea was gradually recovering from the devastation of the “Arduous March”. However, with the passage of power to Kim Jong-un came the rise of North Korea’s nuclear and missile ballistic programs—much to the dismay of North Korea’s neighbors and the United States. Videos of parades displaying the country’s nuclear weapons and unannounced test-missile launches became status quo during Kim Jong-un’s administration. The United Nations Security Council, which includes some of North Korea’s closest allies, implemented counter-proliferation sanctions in an attempt to restrict the growth of North Korea’s unsupervised nuclear programs. Other nations including the United States imposed additional sanctions as a result of the nuclear activities in North Korea. Additionally, the United States implemented human rights-related sanctions as well as sanctions in response to the North Korean cyberattacks.¹⁵ These measures, which were mostly economic sanctions, resulted in an even more isolated North Korean economy—one that is roughly 53 times smaller than that of South Korea.¹⁶ Therefore, when Trump mentioned his willingness to not only meet with Kim Jong-un but somewhat “solve” the North Korean “issue”, the main concern for the North Korean administration was lifting these economic sanctions.

While Trump walking over the demilitarized zone into North Korea may have received the most news coverage of the iconic 2018 meetings, the repatriation of American soldiers’ bodies remained a primary talking point for the American delegation. The 2018 Singapore and Hanoi summits between the two leaders resulted in very few tangible advancements for US and North Korean relations, yet one of the only agreements between the two was the repatriation of over 200 remains that were believed to be fallen US soldiers.¹⁷ This repatriation effort was unilaterally done by the North Korean government. Moreover, during this period, North Korean officials had promised Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to resume negotiations regarding the joint field

activities which had been suspended for 15 years.¹⁸ However, after the United States refused to lift economic sanctions on North Korea during the Hanoi summit, North Korea cut off contact with the United States as well as any hope of future bilateral repatriation efforts.¹⁹

Discussion and Analysis

During each period, North Korea was in need of something that the United States or international community could give to them. In other words, North Korea had used the soldiers' remains as bargaining chips when they were at their most "desperate". The strong desire to repatriate soldiers' remains is a US nationalistic tradition that is unmatched by any other on the international stage. It has become a social contract between the US government and its citizens, which has been legitimized by its repeated practice from World War I all the way to the War on Terror. Despite the military, diplomatic, and civil resources needed to ensure that soldiers' remains can be safely returned to US soil, both the United States government and military families expect that, if at all possible, US remains should be repatriated. This was reflected through the US news coverage which never questioned nor explained the reasons why the United States puts so much effort into the repatriation of soldiers' bodies. North Korean leaders and officials seemed to have recognized this and used this social contract and public expectation to their advantage to achieve certain means on the international stage, whether explicitly stated or not. Whether these remains are used in exchange for North Korean remains or, more recently, as good faith measures during talks about aid or sanction-lifting, these soldiers' remains continue to influence some of the most hostile discussions in the international sphere.

The contextualization of three of the most successful repatriation periods between North Korea and the United States is crucial for understanding when success of recovering and returning US soldiers' remains is most likely to occur in the future. In the direct aftermath of the Korean War, North Korea was attempting to establish its government and the nation as a worthy economic world-contender after it had been devastated by the war. Additionally, "Operation Glory" saw an exchange of remains from both sides of the 38th Parallel. During the 1990s, North Korea was experiencing a famine that was so dire that it asked for international aid. The United States joint field activities for repatriating the US remains provided much-needed financial inflow to the resolute

country during this time. Finally, in 2018, North Korea was bombarded with sanctions because of its nuclear and ballistic missile program. Kim Jong-un joined the Singapore and Hanoi summits, attempting to induce the lifting of US economic sanctions that had hurt North Korea's already struggling economy. The promise to repatriate remains by the North Korean government seemed to be one of good faith in hopes that it would soften the US position on North Korean economic sanctions. Repatriation efforts were promised at the initial summit between Kim Jong-un and Trump and at the following summit during which Kim Jong-un focused on talks of lifting these economic sanctions.²⁰ When the US refused to lift the sanctions, talks about future repatriation efforts stopped.

In line with these observations, this paper argues that the optimal time for the United States to propose another mass repatriation is when North Korea is "desperate" for international support—whether that be in the form of aid or political leniency. For the United States' government, repatriation of its soldiers' bodies is a national duty. This is clear from the great diplomatic and economic commitments and sacrifices the US makes to ensure the safe repatriation of its soldiers' bodies despite receiving little tangible political or economic gains. Therefore, the question of repatriation of American soldiers' bodies from North Korea is not a question of "if" but of "when". North Korea is aware of this sense of duty and, as a result, agrees to repatriate American soldiers' remains when it seeks to gain something from the United States, such as economic or political concessions. Although North Korea often antagonizes the United States, Pyongyang is also willing to cooperate with Washington when it is in its own interests to do so. Arguably, North Korea, which has little leverage in negotiations, exploits the United States' sense of obligation to its own advantage.

In short, while the United States may see these soldiers' remains as part of a nationalistic ideology that highlights the protection and commitment the state has to its citizens, North Korea sees them to an end. The United States must recognize that their feelings of duty and sentimentality do not extend beyond their borders and act accordingly at the right opportunity if they want to ensure the repatriation of the remaining American soldiers' remains in North Korea. Furthermore, while these repatriation efforts may initially be viewed as just a bargaining chip, this cooperation and increased interaction may also have the potential to promote overall diplomatic growth between the two

countries. While efforts to repatriate American soldiers' bodies may be considered a superficial activity for the two ideological foes to engage in, the cooperative nature of the work will increase communication between North Korea and the United States. For both North Korea and the United States, working together to repatriate soldiers' remains does not have extreme political consequences. Thus, repatriation may serve as a great opportunity to participate in low-stakes cooperation activities where neither nation feels as if they have politically "lost" to the other.

Conclusion

The US presence is still and will continue to be largely felt on the Korean Peninsula, seeing that the United States is South Korea's strongest military, economic, and political ally. Successful repatriation efforts that returned hundreds of American soldiers' remains to the US have occurred, which form a basis for future repatriation efforts between Washington and Pyongyang. However, the repatriation efforts were made mostly on North Korea's terms and as a result of North Korea's financial needs. North Korean leaders and officials recognize how important the repatriation of the US soldiers' remains is to the United States and have used it to their advantage. These repatriation efforts should not be ignored nor deemed irrelevant, for they represent the intersection of international position, nationalism, and memories of war in the United States and North Korea. While repatriation efforts have not created long-term positive relations between the two countries, they do create an opportunity for conducting future bilateral cooperation. This is not to say that North Korea and the United States will become allies through these efforts, since they are ideological foes after all, but simply suggests that these operations can lessen the hostility between the two in the international relations sphere as they encourage bilateral communication. Lastly, this paper does not explore in depth how the repatriation of remains has intersected with the nuclear and ballistic missile programs in the past. Therefore, the paper calls for further research on this topic, as well as on the intersection of repatriation with US nationalism.

Notes

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