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Let's end the Korean War

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JOHN FEPPER

Although the Korean War — which began 50 years ago Sunday — hasn't officially ended, the recent summit between the two Korean leaders indicates that North and South Korea are finally moving toward reconciliation.

The two Koreas are closer than ever before. The meeting between South Korean President Kim Dae Jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il was preceded by an unprecedented surge in inter-Korean cooperation. More than 200,000 South Koreans have now gone by boat to visit Mount Kungang in the north, thanks to Hyundai Corp.'s tourism project.

Joint soccer games and musical concerts have expanded unofficial contacts. Business across the divided peninsula is booming, compared to the past. Inter-Korean trade hit an all-time high in 1999, a 50 percent increase over the year before. The United States is acting, however, as though the Korean War is an ongoing conflict, not the "forgotten war" of history textbooks.

True, the Clinton administration has provided economic assistance to North Korea. The United States has recently fulfilled a 1994 promise by lifting some sanctions against the North Korean regime. And the State Department no longer considers North Korea a "rogue" state.

But the Clinton administration has steadfastly refused to change the U.S. military stance in East Asia. There are still 37,000 U.S. troops in South Korea alone and 100,000 troops in the Asia-Pacific region. The Pentagon insists on maintaining a military capacity that would

allow the United States to fight two wars simultaneously, one of them in East Asia. The Pentagon argues that U.S. troops must remain on the Korean peninsula even if Korea is reunified to ensure stability in the region.

The Nixon, Carter and Bush administrations all considered military reductions in East Asia. But the Clinton administration has gone in the opposite direction by relying on a more aggressive military strategy.

For instance, the United States is pursuing the woefully expensive Theater Missile Defense program ("Son of Star Wars") over the objections of Russia, China and other countries. The Clinton administration has pushed Japan into

embracing a more offensive military posture and continues to sell high-tech weaponry to South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. It's doing so even though North Korea's entire government budget of \$9.4 billion, according to official South Korean estimates, is smaller than South Korea's military budget alone, which is more than \$13 billion.

To justify its military presence on the peninsula, the U.S. government cites the threat of North Korea's weapons program, specifically its ability to build an intercontinental missile. But according to many arms-control experts, this threat is exaggerated — by both North Korea and the United States.

In reality, North Korea's missile program is technologically suspect and more useful as a bargaining chip than for military purposes. According to the Federation of American

Scientists, North Korean missiles cannot reach the United States and its longest-range missile, the Taepodong 2, has never been tested. Moreover, the sealing of used nuclear fuel rods from North Korea's Yongbyon reactor, a program frozen under a 1994 agreement with the United States, was completed at the end of May by a private U.S. firm.

In its waning days, the Clinton administration can still adjust to reality. In addition to lifting economic sanctions against North Korea, it needs to consider a military reorientation. The United States should back away from the missile-defense program and put the withdrawal of U.S. troops on the negotiating table.

Even Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., the Pentagon-friendly chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, has declared that maybe it's time for U.S. troops in Korea to return home. Only when the United States shows a willingness to negotiate down its overwhelming military advantage will a vulnerable country such as North Korea freeze its existing missile programs.

In the last decade, the United States has recognized Vietnam, made peace with Russia and ushered China into the international economic order. There is still an open wound in East Asia, and the United States is partly responsible. It is now time for the United States to start putting away its weapons and to negotiate an end to the Fifty Years War.

■ The writer, based in Tokyo, reports for "Foreign Policy In Focus," a joint project of the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Policy Studies and the Interhemispheric Resource Center in Albuquerque, N.M.

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