Written by Ginny Grimsley
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The World May be Caught Sleeping, Says Former Dept. of Defense Worker

The longest, most heavily guarded border in the world, the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Korea, could easily steal American and world headlines as the issue of the day, and most of us would be caught blindsided, says Ian R. Kelley, who served 35 years in the U.S. Department of Defense.

"Sure, there are plenty of competing issues out there, but I don't think our leaders or media give proper attention to the two Koreas – neither the immediacy of their issues nor the long-term potential consequences," says Kelley, author of "UNCIVIL SERVANTS," (www.ianrkelley.com) , a political thriller that fictionalizes an attempt to open borders at the 38th parallel, uniting North and South Korea.

He reviews the five major ways the two Koreas may affect the United States, and the rest of the world:

• U.S. military personnel: More than 30,000 U.S. military, Department of Defense civilians and contractors live and work under constant threat from the last remnant of the "Bamboo Curtain," says Kelley. With ongoing conflicts and threats continuing throughout the Middle East and North Africa, a renewed shooting war between the two sides would stress an already stretched-thin military.

• Same as the old boss? Global uncertainty: Kim Jong-un, the North Korean leader since his father Kim Jong-il died in 2011, made a surprise New Year's broadcast on state media. He called for an end to confrontation between the two Koreas – still officially at war without a peace treaty ending their 1950-53 conflict. But this will not be the first olive branch from the North; past statements have been used for tactical purposes only. Very little is known about the new leader, furthering the guardedness of regional neighbors.

• A reunited Korea – the good: Most agree the world would be a safer, more humane place when, and if, North and South Korea unite. Putting an end to famine and starvation in the North, dramatically reducing the threat of nuclear war and preventing weapons of mass destruction from falling into the hands of terrorist organizations is an imperative.

• A reunited Korea –the bad: Some in the Japanese government fear the industrial might of a reunited Korea. The abundance of the North's natural resources coupled with the South's technology and innovation could have devastating results for Japan's economy. China worries about the new border and how that nation's security will be guaranteed. Even some labor union leaders in South Korea worry about the consequences if millions of workers flock south seeking a better life.

• Friends & enemies (a delicate balance): Should hostilities flare up between the North and South, powerful allies on both sides would be drawn into the fray. The U.S. would almost certainly side with the south, damaging any negotiations with those who may side with the North, including Russia.

Reunification of the Koreas is inevitable, Kelley says, but the many unknowns about the North compound the potential negative effects.

"Remember, there are still shots being fired in the DMZ – most recently, an unconfirmed report that North Korean soldiers killed two 'defectors' who were trying to cross to the South," Kelley says. "It is not a stable area."

About Ian R. Kelley

Ian R. Kelley retired from the Department of Defense in 2005 after 35 years service. For many years, he lived and worked in South Korea teaching English and communications skills to Korean and U.S. military personnel. He worked as a professor at Keimyung College University in Daegu, South Korea. He currently resides in Tarpon Springs, Fla.