

Policy Forum 09-038: A New U.S. Policy toward Korea: Korean American Recommendations for Real Change

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A New U.S. Policy toward Korea: Korean American Recommendations for Real Change

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By John H. Kim and Indong Oh

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I. Introduction

John H. Kim, a Korean American attorney who served in the U.S. Army in South Korea, and Indong

Oh, a Korean American Medical Doctor and co-chair of the June 15th Korean American Committee for Peace and Reunification of Korea, write, "As a candidate who got elected on a campaign promise of "change," President Obama has a unique mandate and opportunity to shape a new U.S. policy toward Korea, including ending the long, costly Korean War finally and normalizing our relations with North Korea. However, it is not clear whether he recognizes the golden opportunity to bring a real change to the old, misguided U.S. policy toward Korea."

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II. Article by John H. Kim and Indong Oh

- "A New U.S. Policy toward Korea: Korean American Recommendations for Real Change"

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The recent uproar of the U.S. government and its allies over the rocket launch of North Korea on April 5 and the subsequent strong reactions by both the U.S. and North Korea confirm once more the deep mistrust and hostility that exist between the U.S. and North Korea (DPRK). The DPRK claimed that it succeeded in putting an experimental communication satellite into orbit. However, the U.S. military claimed that "no object entered orbit."

Considering the facts that India, Israel and Iran already launched their satellites, without any international condemnation, that Japan already launched 25 satellites, and South Korea is now preparing to launch its own satellite in July this year, it is quite understandable why North Korea is so defiant in this matter.

More troublesome at present is the dangerous cycle of escalation by both the U.S. and North Korea. DPRK announced recently that it would walk away from the Six-Party Talks and reactivate its nuclear reactors in protest against the Security Council President's statement against the rocket launch.

In the face of the increasing dilemmas in the Six-Party Talks, crisis in the denuclearization process, and the deteriorating security condition on the Korean Peninsula, what is the Obama administration's policy toward North Korea? In view of the mixed signals toward North Korea and the appointment of only a part-time Special Representative for North Korea Policy, many people are wondering whether the Obama administration is serious in developing a new policy for Korea.

In his inaugural address, President Obama spoke to the world as follows: "And so to all other peoples and governments who are watching today... know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman, and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity." As concerned Korean Americans working for genuine peace and friendship between the United States and Korea, we were deeply moved by President Obama's kind message of friendship with other people around the world. Was his message directed to the North Korean people too? We hope so. In any case, his words will mean something only when they are transformed into an actual policy.

Recommendations

If President Obama wants to develop a new U.S. foreign policy, Korea is certainly one of the key places that deserve his priority attention for change. The new U.S. policy toward Korea should start with a reaffirmation of the grand vision of "perpetual peace and friendship" between the U.S. and Korea, as promised in the first treaty between the two nations in 1882. It should reflect the

fundamental American values for peace, friendship and free trade, and be applied to both parts of Korea. Moreover, it should not be just another old wine in a new bottle, but a real change in substance, containing some of the following elements.

1) End the Korean War First.

The past U.S. policy of focusing on the elimination of the North Korean nuclear weapons has been full of troubles and difficulties. A better approach to resolving the nuclear issue successfully is to provide a fundamental security guarantee to the DPRK government by signing a peace treaty--ending the Korean War formally. The old policy of demanding North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons first, prior to signing a peace treaty or normalization of relations with North Korea, did not work out in the past and it will not succeed in the future either.

From the North Korean perspectives, it is impossible for them to give up their weapons of deterrence, as long as they are facing growing military threats from the US, Japan and ROK, while the Korean War is continuing. Although the Armistice Agreement of 1953 stopped the heavy fighting in Korea, the War never ended officially with a peace treaty. After more than a half century, the Armistice Agreement is now badly outdated.

In the absence of a peace treaty, there have been continuous military buildups, sporadic military fights and constant tensions across the DMZ in Korea. The Cold War ended in the world long ago, except in Korea unfortunately. It is about time for the U.S. to end the last Cold War.

North Korea had officially proposed a peace treaty to the United States in 1974, but it had been ignored by the past U.S. administrations until recently. As an inducement for the denuclearization by North Korea, the Bush administration agreed to a provision for a peace treaty in the 9/19/2005 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks: "The directly related parties will negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula at an appropriate separate forum."

Thus, there is already a good basis upon which the Obama administration can play a leadership role in negotiating a peace treaty so that a new era of permanent peace, disarmament, reconciliation, and cooperation can begin in earnest on the Korean Peninsula. What is needed now is a political will on the part of President Obama to commence such negotiations for a peace treaty with North Korea, South Korea and China.

2) Reduce Military Tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

In the past, North Korea used to refuse to take any steps toward disarmament or even enter dialogue whenever it faced major US- South Korean (ROK) joint military exercises-- usually in March and August. North Korea is apparently angry about them for two reasons: fear of possible military attacks against it and diversion of their resources from civilian economy to military.

For instance, on March 9 this year, the U.S. launched a 12-day joint military exercise with ROK, involving some 26,000 U.S. troops (Army, Navy and Air Force), a nuclear carrier with supporting ships, and numerous war planes, along with a similar number of South Korean troops. In response, North Korea put its military forces on alert and announced that it would launch a satellite, which can enhance its capability to launch a ballistic missile, during April 4-8 period.

To create a favorable atmosphere for commencing negotiations for a peace treaty and to make further progress in the denuclearization process, it is incumbent upon the parties concerned to reduce military tensions on the Korean Peninsula at this time. Thus, the Obama administration should stop all major U.S. military exercises on the Korean Peninsula in the future, and ask both

governments of Korea to do the same. The joint US-ROK military exercises had been simply too provocative and threatening to North Korea as well as counterproductive to any diplomatic talks with North Korea in the past.

3) Normalize Diplomatic Relations with North Korea (DPRK).

The unfortunate consequences of the past U.S. administrations' hard-line policy of containment and regime change in North Korea, under the six years of the Bush administration in particular, have been an increasing militarization of the North Korean society and military buildups by North Korea, including the nuclear weapon test in 2006 and development of long-range missiles that can reach the U.S. continent. This has undermined not only the NPT (nonproliferation treaty) regime in the world but also the security interests of the United States.

When the two Koreas entered the United Nations together in 1991, there was a high expectation that there would be a cross-recognition of the two Koreas by Russia and China on the one hand and the U.S. and Japan on the other hand. Although Russia and China recognized ROK soon thereafter, the latter nations refused to recognize DPRK so far. This is another major reason for the continuing hostility between North Korea and the U.S. as well as between North Korea and Japan.

The time is right now for the Obama administration to take the necessary steps to normalize our diplomatic relations with DPRK. This is something that the Clinton administration already promised in the 1994 Agreed Framework with DPRK but never carried out.

Even before signing a peace treaty, it will be beneficial for the U.S. and DPRK to open a liaison or consular office in Pyongyang and Washington, DC respectively. Such an office would be helpful, in particular, in the speedy reunion of the separated Korean American families whose relatives are still living in North Korea. It would also facilitate an increase in trade, investments, cultural exchanges, etc. between the two nations. Such a move would also contribute to a further reduction of tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

4) Pursue a Summit with Kim Jong Il.

To build confidence among the related parties and to expedite negotiations for ending the Korean War as well as the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, it will be helpful for President Obama to hold a summit meeting with Chairman Kim Jong Il of North Korea.

A reasonable time for such a summit could be this summer between the 59th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War and the 56th anniversary of signing the Armistice Agreement. Such summit could be arranged by a high-level special envoy of President Obama. Former President Bill Clinton could be a good candidate for such mission.

5) Gradually Withdraw U.S. Troops from South Korea.

As the denuclearization process, peace treaty and normalization talks move forward, the United States should gradually withdraw its 28,500 troops stationed in South Korea by 2012, which is the target date for relinquishing the U.S. military's wartime operational control over the ROK troops to the South Korean government. Our troops have been in Korea for too long, and the goal of defending South Korea is no longer credible.

Since it costs about \$2-4 billion per year to station the U.S. troops in South Korea, and there is a great need to reduce our military spending at present, it will serve the U.S. interests to reduce our troop strength in the ROK, which already has a powerful military to defend itself. South Korea also has twice the population of North Korea, and its annual military spending is about eight times larger

than North Korea's, while South Korea's GDP is 40 times greater than North Korea's.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea will also help in facilitating the self-determination of the Korean people as for the future destiny of their country-free from outside interferences. The U.S. owes a heavy responsibility for the artificial division of Korea at the end of the WW II. That decision went against the long history and interest of the Korean people as a united country. To achieve a permanent peace and security on the Korean Peninsula, it is essential that the division of Korea be ended and the country be allowed to reunite in a peaceful manner. In other words, from now on, Uncle Sam should stop trying to dictate the future of Korean people's destiny, as it had done in the past.

Conclusion

As a candidate who got elected on a campaign promise of "change," President Obama has a unique mandate and opportunity to shape a new U.S. policy toward Korea, including ending the long, costly Korean War finally and normalizing our relations with North Korea. However, it is not clear whether he recognizes the golden opportunity to bring a real change to the old, misguided U.S. policy toward Korea.

It will probably take more than President Obama to bring a real change to our policy toward Korea. The call for change must also come from the American people themselves. It is high time for the Obama administration as well as the American academic community and civil society--especially the think tanks, peace groups, and the Korean American groups--to respond to the call and take concrete steps to promote genuine reconciliation with the Korean people, including the North Koreans in particular.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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