Policy Forum 08-001: Emerging Regional Security Architecture in Northeast Asia

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By James Goodby and Markku Heiskanen

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I. Introduction

James Goodby, former American Ambassador to Finland and currently is a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and a Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and Markku Heiskanen, a non-resident Senior Fellow of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies NIAS in Copenhagen, write, "the future security architecture of Northeast Asia will have at its core the Korean Peninsula, at peace internally and externally, embedded in a set of cooperative

understandings comprising a peace regime, all supported by a regional multilateral mechanism for promoting security and cooperation in Northeast Asia."

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II. Article by James Goodby and Markku Heiskanen

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With hardly anyone taking notice, the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons program have morphed into the world's most important negotiation on regional security architecture since the end of the Cold War. Potentially, it could rank in importance with the 1990 Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany and the creation of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

There are so many moving parts in this negotiation that it is easy to lose sight of the importance of connecting all the various elements in a coherent and mutually supportive manner. For example, when the leaders of North and South Korea met last month they held out the beautiful image of a gathering of three or four leaders to declare an end to the Korean War. Almost immediately, that image was criticized by China which, correctly, saw that China might be left out of a peace settlement.

The "Forgotten War" is being remembered again, but for the way it ended. It began in June 1950 when North Korean military forces drove deep into South Korea, at one point occupying most of the country. A military stalemate ensued, roughly at the 38th parallel and two opposing generals signed an armistice agreement in July 1953. One was an American, Lt. General William K. Harrison, Jr., Commander-in-Chief of the United Nations Command. He signed in a UN capacity because the war to roll back the North Korean forces had been authorized by the United Nations. His co-signer was a North Korean, General Nam Il, who signed for both the North Korean People's Army and for the Chinese People's Volunteers. The South Korean government declined to sign the armistice. Ever since, diplomats have argued about who the parties to a successor arrangement should be and how to finally end a war that began nearly six decades ago.

The legal issue actually is a relatively small part of the puzzle. The bigger issues are political. There are essentially three inter-related elements that bear on bringing peace to divided Korea: an agreement to end the armistice agreement, a larger cluster of agreements that create conditions for peace in Korea, and, finally a regional framework that provides a mechanism for resolving conflicts and promoting peace in a region where divided Korea is not the only bitter residue of the past.

First, the task of ending the armistice arrangements: ending the armistice system cannot be accomplished by a simple statement saying it is all over. To terminate the provisions of the Armistice Agreement, some kind of legal action or agreement accepted by the parties to the agreement is required. That need not include the United Nations, in whose name General Harrison signed the agreement. But it certainly would have to include the United States, which has been among the three chief implementers of the Armistice Agreement, along with North and South Korea.

Should China also be a participant in ending the armistice arrangements? There may be aspects that directly affect China and China should be involved as a guaranteeing power. Other countries may have to be consulted about certain specialized questions. But in the major issues that affect relations

between North and South Korea, the two parts of the divided Korean nation will have to be the primary negotiators with the United States, as the principal external actor in military terms, heavily engaged. U.S., North Korean and South Korean force levels, for example, will have to be regulated in some way. And the armistice arrangement should be replaced by another channel for military-t--military consultations.

The idea of a "peace regime" was formally placed on the negotiating table by the six parties that have been trying to resolve the issues presented by North Korea's nuclear weapons programs - China, Russia, Japan, the United States, and North and South Korea. They agreed last February 13 that "the directly related parties" would negotiate such a regime "at an appropriate separate forum." What is meant by that notion? Conceptually a peace regime includes an array of North-South understandings, some of which may involve other nations. North and South Korea negotiated quite a good facsimile of a peace regime in 1991-92. It was called the "Basic Agreement" and it included most of the measures that a peace regime might be expected to contain - military cooperation, freer movement of people, information, and ideas, and economic cooperation. Its major defect was that it had no external guarantors and it was hostage to good North-South relations. Soon after the Basic Agreement went into effect, the first North Korean nuclear weapons crisis erupted and the agreement became a dead letter.

If it is to be sustainable, the building of a peace regime on the Korean peninsula must be supported by the international system, especially China, Japan, Russia and the United States. And so the third element in the peace process is to create a regional mechanism for security and cooperation. The Helsinki Process that flowed from the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe is a possible model for this.

And so the future security architecture of Northeast Asia will have at its core the Korean Peninsula, at peace internally and externally, embedded in a set of cooperative understandings comprising a peace regime, all supported by a regional multilateral mechanism for promoting security and cooperation in Northeast Asia. Will this ambitious undertaking succeed? It is too early to say but first signs are promising. Now that the dismantlement of the North Korean nuclear program is under way in a verified and internationally recognized manner, with luck, to be completed by the end of the current year it may be possible to proceed towards discussions of how to end the armistice system and how to assemble the components of a peace regime. Discussions of a multilateral mechanism for security and cooperation in Northeast Asia already are underway in a working group established in the Six-Party Talks. The Bush administration seems to be assigning a high priority to resolving many of the tough issues before leaving office. North and South Korean are working harmoniously together. China, Japan, and Russia all have reasons -not necessarily the same-for wanting progress. Perhaps next year-the 55th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice Agreement-a final settlement of that war can be achieved.

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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