

Nautilus Institute PFO 00-01: Regional Approach to Korean Peninsula Security

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Comments on: A Regional Approach to Korean Peninsula Security

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March 13, 2001

I. Introduction

The following is a comment on "A Regional Approach to Korean Security" by Hwal-Woong Lee, which was issued as PFO #00-01A on January 3. This comment is by Bo-Hyug Suh, a researcher of the Institute of Political Economy of Korea (IPECK), a non-profit non-governmental organization in the Republic of Korea working for social progress, the rights of the oppressed, and peaceful reunification of Korea. Suh is also a student in the department of International Relations at Hankook University of Foreign Studies, majoring in DPRK politics.

Suh argues that, while Lee's call for a peaceful solution to the problem of the Korean Peninsula is commendable, his suggestions are impractical. In particular, Suh argues that US troops on the Korean Peninsula, rather than acting as a barrier to regional cooperation, serve as a deterrent to prevent inter-regional conflicts. He also argues that the multilateral approach that Lee advocates fails to take into consideration the complex series of bilateral relations that together maintain regional peace and security.

II. Comments by Bo-Hyug Suh

A Discrepancy Between Cold Reality and Warm Ideal: A Comment on "Re-evaluating the Security Arrangements in the Korean Peninsula"

1. Introduction

The report by Hwal-Woong Lee showed a direction for peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula and fresh implications about the issues concerned. He, unlike most commentators who emphasize the DPRK's threat, proposed a genuine sunshine policy for the ROK and the lifting of US containment against the DPRK. While his suggestions for a "positive peace" are considerable, I would like to comment on his proposal, particularly the problems of US troops stationed in the ROK and a multilateral approach for the peace and unification on the peninsula.

2. US military in Korea as what?

Mr. Lee said that U.S. troops in ROK should be withdrawn for "positive security" or peace on the peninsula, together with the end of the DPRK's intransigence. In this context, he regarded Seoul's "sunshine policy" and Washington's Perry Report as a hindrance for the South-and-North's unification, as they ignore the U.S. military problem. This suggestion associates with the

maintenance of the Pyongyang regime, irrespective of his intention.

In fact, U.S. military power around the world, particularly both in Asia and in Europe, played a significant role as a deterrent power against the socialist camp. But even after the collapse of the eastern socialist countries and the Soviet Union, US forces have tried to maintain international order under the flag of the UN or as a member of alliances. Of course, without saying that the US military has been always in the right, the international order of the post-cold war transformed the US military into a balancer. This is why US forces abroad, at least in Asia, have not been reduced despite the disappearance of the US's chief rival.

The move toward the post-cold war has been relatively slow in Northeast Asia. Furthermore, some observers worry about the uncertain situation that would be the resurgence of the cold war in Northeast Asia, warning of regional conflicts between the northern triangle of the People's Republic of China, Russia, and the DPRK and southern triangle of the US, Japan, and the ROK. Ironically, each component in this region, however, does not challenge the continuous stationing of US forces around the region, including on the Korean peninsula. Not only Japan and the ROK--the US's allies--but even the PRC and Russia officially do not demand the withdrawal of US troops. In particular, relations between the PRC and the US are ambiguous because they are competing as well as cooperating strategically. They both announced a "strategic partnership" just after the pronouncement of a "global partnership" between Washington and Tokyo in 1998. In this vein, US forces in Northeast Asia are viewed as a balancer preventing regional conflicts between the PRC and Japan. Simultaneously, the PRC and Japan check each other at every issue related to their national interests.

Concerning the problem of the US military in the ROK, both Koreas now seemingly consider it as a deterrence against the other. The president of the ROK, Kim Dae-jung, announced that US troops would remain on the peninsula even after unification. President Kim's contention is the same as that of Washington. Meanwhile, due to the loss of the socialist bloc and economic decline, the DPRK had to find another partner for survival. In 1988, when the summer Olympic Games opened in Seoul, Pyongyang officials met their Washington counterparts in Beijing and said privately that US troops in the South were needed to prevent unification through the absorption of the DPRK by the ROK. Since then, DPRK officials have sometimes repeated this statement. Recently, the DPRK has demanded economic benefits in exchange for stopping the development and export of Weapons of Massive Destruction (WMD).

US forces in the South, therefore, are inevitably recognized as a balancer by the countries involved, irrelevant of their official positions. Following this estimation, Mr. Lee's assertion that the US policy of keeping its military in ROK, reflected in the "sunshine policy" of the South government and the Perry Report, is the primary factor contributing to the tension in Korea is invalid. The US military in Germany remains even after the unification of the East and the West.

The future of US forces abroad will be determined not merely by domestic factors, including the popular will of the countries in which the US military is stationed, but by foreign factors such as the attitude of the countries interested in the matter. Considering these two points, US forces in the South will remain at least in the short or middle run. Hence, the withdrawal of the US military would only be accomplished due to the ROK's strong demand combined with peaceful foreign circumstances around the peninsula.

3. Is a multilateral approach the best way?

Mr. Lee proposes a multilateral or regional approach for the "sustainable security" of the Korean

peninsula based on his perception of the security situation around the peninsula, including the issue of the US forces in Korea. He also says that this way is efficient for the honorable withdrawal of the US military. That approach for the solution of conflicts, however, has not always been successful from the historical perspective. Furthermore, this way that Mr. Lee prefers seems to be impractical because it does not deeply consider the complexity of the peninsula and the interests of the countries concerned.

In fact, all parts of the region maintain their security within a network of bilateralism. In this vein, what is more important is not the withdrawal of the US military itself, but the conditions for it internationally as well as domestically. Concerning this discussion, some of Mr. Lee's suggestions (1- 4 in section 6) are agreeable. But, in my thought, these are propositions for the peace of the Korean peninsula mainly through a combination of bilateral setups, rather than the foundation for a multilateral approach.

While there have been and are the robust politics of balance of power, a multilateral framework has not existed in Northeast Asia. Rather, it is true that the reality of complicated bilateral relations is overwhelming the design of a multilateral method for "sustainable security." If we adopt the assumption that a policy, which has as a goal our peaceful and prosperous coexistence, should be constructed under the root of unavoidable reality, one of the urgent tasks is to transform negative conditions into positive, which will start with solving the asymmetrical regional situation, especially in light of DPRK as we know it.

Pyongyang, besieged by neighboring countries with the exception of the PRC, has been seeking escape from economic decline and international isolation through talks with Washington. The Four-Party Talks, though multilateral in form, are essentially based on bilateral relations, mainly those of DPRK and U.S. This is the reason why the Talks have been tedious since their beginning. Thus I'm skeptical of Mr. Lee's formula for Six-Party Talks.

The security problem of Northeast Asia serves to remind us of the diverse dimensions of the post-cold war in this region, particularly on the Korean peninsula. Although the cold war has been dismantled on the global level, regional differences remain. When comparing Europe with Northeast Asia, for instance, the extent of the breakdown of the cold war system is not the same. The present phase toward regional "positive security" in Asia, unlike in Europe, is to accomplish peaceful coexistence preferentially by solving security dilemmas in the region. For this, it is practical to use a way of package bargaining within the relations of each couple involved, with the lateral support of multilateral frameworks if necessary. Therefore, it seems to be more necessary and possible to approach bilaterally, using talks between ROK and DPRK, and between the US and the DPRK, rather than a multilateral setup like Four-Party Talks or Six-Party Talks for the peace around the peninsula and the road to Korean unification.

4. Conclusion

With the disappearance of the cold war system, a lot of international issues that had been restricted by the pressure of the system have been rising on the horizon. Among those are issues like environment, gender, ethnicity, territory, etc. These concepts help us to re-examine security in a new context. Removing it from the narrow box called military security, the content of its perception has been enlarging to include economic security, human security, and so on. Simultaneously, I think it is crucial to analyze two points deserving sincere consideration; the one is the relative primacy of various types of security, considering the interaction among them; and the other is the differentiation of the method for achieving "sustainable security" in distinct contexts.

In conclusion, while consenting with Mr. Lee's perspective for the solution of the problem of the Korean peninsula, I intended to put emphasis on the realistic perception and approach toward the problem noted above. Of course, it is our task to remove the discrepancy between cold reality and warm ideal, seeking true peace or "positive security."

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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