Policy Forum 00-01A: A Regional Approach to Security on the Korean Peninsula

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A Regional Approach to Korean Peninsula Security

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By Hwal-Woong Lee, Korea 2000

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I. Introduction

This essay was contributed by Hwal-Woong Lee, former Foreign Service Officer for the ROK Government and currently a Fellow at Korea-2000, a Los Angeles-based research council on Korean reunification. Lee argues that the continued presence of US troops in the ROK prevents a comprehensive settlement of Korean Peninsula security issues. Instead, he calls for a regionally based approach that would include participation by all interested countries.

II. Essay by Hwal-Woong Lee

"Re-evaluating the Security Arrangements in the Korean Peninsula ---A Proposal for a Regional Approach"

1. New Overtures

Upon his inauguration in February 1998, South Korean President Kim Dae Jung made new overtures to North Korea that are commonly referred to as the "sunshine policy." The policy would do away with the old one, long-followed by his predecessors, of confrontation with North Korea. Instead, the new President would transform the tense relation with the North to a relationship based on reconciliation and cooperation. Furthermore, the new policy would dismantle the cold-war mechanism in favor of a peace structure on the Korean peninsula. Despite anticipated criticisms from conservative elements, Kim's government swears that it will stick to the new policy.

Meanwhile, the United States, in the wake of a North Korean long-range missile test in August 1998, appointed former Defense Secretary William Perry as Special Coordinator on North Korea policy. After strenuous consultations with officials, pundits and experts in the U.S., South Korea, Japan, China and Russia and a trip to North Korea, Perry released a report in October 1999. His report recommends the following: (1) The U.S. should negotiate with North Korea for its total renunciation of nuclear and missile programs. (2) In reciprocal fashion, the U.S. should, in alliance with South Korea and Japan, gradually reduce pressures against North Korea, normalize relations with it, relax

sanctions against it and take other positive steps. (3) If the negotiations fail to produce desired results, the U.S. and the allies should take specific steps to contain North Korean threat. (4) The U.S. must not withdraw any of its forces from Korea. Perry expressed his hope that the implementation of these measures, if met with North's positive responses, will result in a secure, stable and prosperous Korean peninsula after decades of insecurity.

2. Windy Sunshine Policy?

North's reaction to the new U.S. stand is cautiously responsive. At the end of the talks with the U.S. in Berlin in September 1999, it agreed to refrain from taking any actions detrimental to the atmosphere of bilateral talks. It also formally announced, in response to Washington's partial lifting of decades-long economic sanctions against it, that it will withhold its missile tests as long as high level talks with Washington are going on. When the first meeting of such talks will take place is not clear yet.

Much to the frustration of Seoul, however, Pyongyang's reaction to the "sunshine policy" has been rather negative. After several months of initial silence, Pyongyang called the new policy the simple repetition of the same old one under different wrappings, with an ulterior intention to eventually absorb the North's socialist system into the South's "corrupt capitalist system." In a recent statement, Pyongyang demanded Seoul to do the following three things as prerequisites for possible North-South dialogue: (1) disassociate itself from the alliance with foreign powers and discontinue conducting joint military exercises with foreign forces; (2) repeal the National Security Law; and (3) do not repress popular movements for national reunification.

Despite some applause and endorsement from within and without, the "sunshine policy" has a fundamental limitation. The idea of this policy originates from a story in Aesop's Fables: to make a man take off his coat, stop blowing winds and use sunshine instead. For the "sunshine policy" to be effective, therefore, the winds must stop blowing first. Now, what are the winds that are blowing against North Korea? South Korea's rancorous animosity against the North certainly is one. But by far the strongest of all the winds North Korea is afraid of is the threat coming from the perennial presence of the U.S. military in South Korea. Yet, Seoul's "sunshine policy," while offering a relaxation of tension coupled with increased economic benefits, emphasizes that its security is to be guaranteed by the presence of U.S. forces in South Korea. This means that the much-touted "sunshine" policy is at best a "windy sunshine policy," not even warm enough to make North Korea take off its coat of seclusion from the outside world. The Perry Report also unmistakably recommends that the U.S. must not withdraw any of its forces from South Korea, based on the belief that the security in the Korean peninsula has been safeguarded by the presence of American forces in Korea.

But, one must recognize that the Korean problem persists not because of North Korea's intransigence alone. The hegemonic U.S. policy of keeping its military in South Korea, thereby causing incessant touch-and-go situations vis-a-vis North Korea, is the primary factor contributing to the tension in Korea. Regrettably, both Seoul's "sunshine policy" and Washington's Perry's Report turn a blind eye toward this crux of the problem. Indeed, the question of U.S. military presence in South Korea is the most crucial point of contention that has to be solved not only for the success of "sunshine policy" but also for the reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas and the eventual peaceful reunification into one Korea.

In South Korea, however, the discussion of this most important subject has been effectively banned under successive authoritative regimes. And it still remains so even under the present Kim Dae Jung

regime, although it claims itself to be democratic. The ruling elite in South Korea is still dead set against repealing, or even revising, the notorious National Security Law, which incriminates, among many others, any expression of opinions sympathetic or analogous to North Korean views, such as demanding the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

3. Positive Vs. Passive Security

When a country deems another country as its adversary or potential enemy and chooses to take a confrontational stance against it, it becomes absolutely important to establish and maintain an adequate security system. Such a system will consist of either one or some combination of the following: (1) building up a military force stronger than the potential enemy, (2) securing strong retaliatory means, which would effectively discourage the enemy's will to strike first, or (3) forming a military alliance with another strong country or countries if the aforementioned two measures are either unattainable or insufficient. In the Korean peninsula, the position of the U.S. is the case of (1), South Korea's position is the combination of (1) and (3), and North Korea's is the case of (2). When such confrontation and the resulting arms build-up and formation of alliances are left unchecked, the tension between the two sides could escalate to the point of explosion. It is also possible, however, that such tense situation arising from the confrontation would be sustained for some time without developing into actual military engagements. In the case of Korea, for example, there have been no actual military conflicts, except for some minor skirmishes, for the past 46 years since the signing of the armistice agreement. There are people who consider such a situation as the maintenance of peace. Many U.S. policymakers consider that the peace in Korea has been safeguarded by the presence of U.S. forces in the South. Some South Koreans also share such a view.

The security maintained under such a setup is at best "a security on a tinderbox." It does not produce a genuine peace. It is a negative or passive security. Above all, people in North Korea are never able to live in peace under the constant threat from U.S. soldiers in the South. The one-man- or one-party-dictatorship of the Pyongyang regime, under which North Koreans have been living with severe political, economic and social strains, is being enforced and persevered with allegedly in order to counter the menace from U.S. forces in the South. North Korea, therefore, has had to spend substantial amount of money in order to build up and maintain its military strength, including weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, even though its people were reportedly dying in hunger. This is a stark expression of Pyongyang's determination to defend its system in which it believes even at the expense of the lives of many people.

The situation in the South is different but not much better. Although it has lately improved slightly, the people in the South have been living under inescapable constraints arising from the fear of the North. This made them keep American soldiers there at high cost and have an American general exercise wartime commanding authority over their own military forces, an act tantamount to the repudiation of their own sovereignty. They are even forced to tolerate the violation of their law enforcement system in which American soldiers can commit crimes against Koreans and leave the country unscathed as the U.S. refuses to recognize South Korea's right to punish them. Also, the South Korean people have had to endure many decades of oppression and tribulations under military dictatorship, which tactically manipulated them by inflating the threat from the North. The seemingly incurable and widespread political corruption and social injustice in South Korea have been left uncontrolled and thriving on the hotbed of an absolute and irrational anti-North Korea policy. The recent IMF crisis was very much an inevitable outcome of the accumulation of such corruption and injustice. One cannot call such situation as peace.

Security and peace in a real sense should be sought after and realized by reducing or eliminating the

state of confrontation with the adversary that constitutes the source of fear. A security maintained chiefly by a predominant military strength by one side, therefore, is not a genuine security because it causes fear and insecurity to the opposite side. In a genuine security or positive security, both sides should feel secure. The best way of realizing a positive security is to materialize a situation where the enemy is no longer an enemy and the adversary has become a friend.

4. Four Basic Tasks

The primary incidents that caused the tension in Korea were the division of the peninsula by foreign powers in 1945 and the subsequent setting up of two warring governments on both sides of the 38th parallel. The secondary incidents exacerbating the tension were the North's military attack on the South in June 1950, followed by the U.S. intervention in the civil war and the ensuing invasion into the North, which in turn invited the participation of China in the Korean conflict. If either side had won the war militarily, the division of Korea would have had ended with it. But that did not happen and an armistice agreement was signed in 1953. After the Geneva conference to work out a political solution to the Korean problem failed in 1954, the division of Korea, under the name of a military armistice, has been kept intact for forty-five years and counting. The Chinese soldiers were withdrawn in the meantime, but the U.S. forces are still there and prolonging confrontation with North Korea. Although North Korea regards the presence of U.S. forces in the South as the principal cause of tension in Korea and, therefore, insists that a peace treaty should be concluded and U.S. forces withdrawn from the South, the U.S. and South Korea have been flatly rejecting such demands. The U.S. and South Korea hold that a withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea will invite another invasion by the North.

Under such circumstances, if we are to find a solution to transfer the present passive or negative security arrangement in Korea to a positive one, we have to clearly distinguish the basic composites of the present military stalemate in the Korean peninsula. We could easily pinpoint them as (1) the possibility of North's renewed attack on the South, (2) the threat to the security of North Korea by the presence of U.S. forces in the South, and (3) South Korea's anti-North Korea policy based on the mistrust and fear of the North. Of the above three composites, (1) and (3) can be eliminated by exchanging firm non-aggression pledges between Seoul, Pyongyang and Washington and by realizing a substantial and verifiable arms reductions on both sides of the Military Demarcation Line, including North Korea's renunciation of its WMD programs. Composite (2) can be removed by withdrawing U.S. forces from South Korea. Therefore, there are four basic tasks to realize a genuine, positive and sustainable security system in the Korean peninsula: (1) reconfirmation of non-aggression pledges by all parties concerned, (2) effective disarmament on both sides of the dividing line, including the scrapping of the North's WMD programs, (3) the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea, and (4) a joint guarantee of Korea's peace and security by the four powers, namely the U.S., China, Russia and Japan. These four tasks, however, are closely inter-related and, therefore, cannot be undertaken individually or separately. It is necessary that they are put on the negotiating table simultaneously and determined in one comprehensive package deal.

5. A Scope for Regional Approach

In order to successfully undertake the four basic tasks and resolve the security question of the Korean peninsula once and for all, we should approach the problem not in terms of multiple of separate bilateral relationships among North Korea, South Korea and the U.S. but in terms of a multilateral or regional relationship encompassing the six relevant countries of the region; i.e., North Korea, South Korea, the U.S., China, Russia and Japan. The question of the security of Korean

peninsula should be resolved within the framework of such regional arrangements.

There are many specific reasons why the Korean security problems could be better handled in a regional setup.

1) Historically, Korea's security was a problem of deep concern to its neighboring countries: China, Russia, Japan and most recently the U.S.
2) The solution to the Korean problem has been attempted mostly through bilateral negotiations between the countries that fought in the Korean War of 1950-53, and whose wartime hostile sentiments are still far from being soothed. By adding Russia and Japan, which have vital interest in the security of Korea but were not belligerent parties in the Korea War, the discussion would be much less thorny and more constructive, and the implementation of any agreement reached could be guaranteed with more certainty. As a matter of fact, Russia and Japan want to take part in an international discussion on the Korean problem.
3) How to handle and realize the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea is the key to the solution of the problem; and the regional approach could make it much easier. It would be very difficult for the U.S. as the single superpower of the world to accept the withdrawal of its forces from Korea as the result of bilateral or trilateral negotiations with North Korea and South Korea. However, it would be easier to work out a plan, through multilateral negotiations, to transform, without impairing the prestige of the U.S., the status of U.S. forces from a belligerent military that fought in the Korean War to a military with a mission to safeguard the security of the region. Under such arrangement, U.S. forces inimical to North Korea would be able to gracefully pull out from South Korea.
4) The U.S. lately insists that its forces in Korea should remain there indefinitely because they are necessary for the security of the region. If that is the case, they should be deployed with the consent of the countries of the region concerned, not by the unilateral decision of the U.S. Otherwise, U.S. forces in Korea will eventually become the cause of regional conflicts, not the guardian of regional peace.
5) Japan, which "went ballistic" when North Korea's long-range missile flew over its territory last year, is moving toward rearmament, which in turn causes China deep concern. North Korea's WMD programs are, therefore, no longer a bilateral issue. They are now regional concerns.
6) China and Russia are countries that have once exercised dominant influence in the Korean peninsula. Japan is the country that colonized Korea for 35 years in this century. The U.S. is the country that has been singularly exercising hegemonic dominance over the Korean peninsula for the past half a century. Against this background, it is not desirable that only one country exercise hegemonic dominance over Korea. It is equally undesirable that two or more countries be engaged in dispute or conflict over the dominant position in the peninsula. In fact, there are good possibilities that these countries, if left alone, will sometime in the future be engaged in a brawling over political predominance in Korea. Regional security arrangements could be the best solution to prevent such disturbances. In this connection, Germany's case is instructive. The former Soviet leader Gorbachev agreed to the accession to NATO of unified Germany when he was convinced that a potentially strong country like unified Germany could be better kept reined by being subjected to international arrangements like NATO.

Besides the Korean problem, there are a number of complicated bilateral and multilateral problems involving China, Russia, Japan the U.S. In many cases, these problems can be easily and peacefully solved when tackled comprehensively within the framework of regional setup. An East Asian regional organization will also help protect the interest of the region as a whole in regards to the settlement of problems of a wider scope involving competing interests between different regions.

6. Steps Toward a Positive Security Arrangement

It may be possible to take the following steps in order to transform the present passive security setup in Korea to a positive security system based on a regional arrangement.

1) South Korea should regain from the U.S. the full commanding authority over its own military.
2) The two Koreas and the U.S. should reconfirm their pledges of non-aggression in the Korean peninsula. Between the two Koreas, this could be done either by reconfirming the relevant non-aggression clauses contained in the Agreement between the Two Koreas on Reconciliation, Exchange and Cooperation signed on December 13, 1991, or by adopting a new non-aggression pledge. Between the U.S. and North Korea, the Joint Statement made on June 11, 1993 agreed to the principles of assurance against threat and use of force, including nuclear weapons, mutual respect for each other's sovereignty, and noninterference in each other's internal affairs. These principles were reaffirmed in The Agreed Framework signed on October 21, 1994. However, it would be much more desirable to adopt a new document in which the intention of non-aggression by both countries is manifestly stated.
3) Both Koreas should declare their readiness to agree to substantial arms reductions on both sides of Military Demarcation Line, and make a joint or separate statement requesting that the U.S. should withdraw its forces from South Korea in line with the process of arms reductions of the two Koreas.
4) The Korean Armistice Agreement of 1953 should be superseded by a Peace Treaty through negotiations among the two Koreas and the U.S.
5) Upon conclusion of a peace treaty, the Mutual Defense Treaty between South Korea and the U.S., concluded in 1953, should be abrogated.
6) The U.S. should withdraw its forces from South Korea in line with the implementation of arms reductions by the two Koreas.
7) The two Koreas, together with the U.S. if appropriate, should propose the convening of a Six-Party conference (the two Koreas, the U.S., China, Russia and Japan) with a view to overseeing the process of non-aggression pledges, disarmament, and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea and to setting up an East Asia Peace and Security Organization.
8) The two Koreas may also propose either Seoul or Pyongyang as the possible site of the conference and the Organization.
9) The conference should set up principles, rules and regulations relating to the maintenance of security in the region through peaceful solution of the problems between the countries concerned, including the maintenance of security in the Korean peninsula, and should establish an East Asia Peace and Security Organization with the mission to implement the principles, rules and regulations as adopted by the conference.
10) The conference should also define the principles and procedures to create and maintain a regional security force, including the redeployment of U.S. forces in some part of the region, with a mission to safeguard regional security.

7. Formula

There have been a series of Four-Party Talks among diplomats from the two Koreas, China and the U.S. since December 1997, but so far no significant progress has been made. At the same time, the chief delegates to the Four-Party Talks from North Korea and the U.S. have been discussing some substantial security matters at a separate series of bilateral talks. South Korea is excluded from such talks because North Korea doesn't recognize it as a negotiating partner since it plays only second fiddle to the U.S. China's role in the Four-Party Talks is also rather secondary. It is very unlikely that the four basic tasks mentioned above could ever be undertaken through these meetings.

Meanwhile, Japan is a regular member of the trilateral U.S.-Japan-South Korea consultative meetings where the three countries' North Korea policies and the negotiation strategies at the Four-Party Talks are reviewed and coordinated. In this sense, Japan is already a participant in the process of exploration for a new security arrangement in Korea. This means that only Russia, one of the two coterminous neighbors of Korea, is totally excluded from the process. It would be highly advisable to consolidate these disorganized and inefficient negotiating channels into one well-organized forum by expanding the present Four-Party Talks to Six-Party Talks with Japan and Russia added to the present four participants.

Once the Six-Party Talks are formally launched, a three-party committee consisting of the two Koreas and the U.S. should be nominated with the terms of reference to discuss and determine the procedures necessary for the implementation of steps 1 through 6 as enumerated in the aforementioned "Steps toward a Positive Security Arrangement." The results of the discussion and determinations as well as necessary recommendations by the three-party committee should be reported to the general session of the Six-Party Talks. Based on the decisions and recommendations of the three-party committee, the general session should establish the principles and procedures by which the peace and security of the Korean peninsula are guaranteed by the four powers surrounding the Korean peninsula.

The Six-Party Talks could further discuss and take whatever actions are appropriate for the formation of East Asia Peace and Security Organization and its regional security forces.

8. Sustainable Peace in Korea

Given the division of the country and the stationing of foreign forces on their homeland, the circumstances for reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas have not necessarily been favorable. Yet, the fact that both North and South Korea have been struggling with the heavy burden of an arms race in their internecine competition for half a century is sheer stupidity. It is also absurd that South Korea, with twice the population and more than ten times the economic strength of the North, could not take care of its own security problems by itself and had to keep foreign forces on its soil for so long. North and South Koreans are after all same people with same culture and history. Koreans themselves, therefore, should endeavor to create a situation where they have neither to compete or fear each other nor to accommodate and entertain foreign soldiers on their homeland. They have to come up with some kind of security arrangements that are commensurate with their long aspiration for national reunification.

On its part, the U.S. should retool its overall policy on Korea in the light of the legitimate demand of the Korean people for national reunification. It would be most appropriate for the U.S. to initiate an arrangement in which the possibility of a new war in Korea is effectively eliminated and the U.S., after gracefully withdrawing its forces from South Korea, can still deploy its forces in East Asia within the framework of a new regional security system.

When such policies are adopted and the necessary measures are successfully implemented, the peace and security of the Korean peninsula will be safeguarded internally through non-aggression pledges by the parties concerned supplemented by substantial arms reductions and internationally through the adjustment of conflicting interests of, and the system of multilateral guarantee by, the neighboring four powers.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

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