

Nautilus Institute PFO 00-02: Engaging North Korea



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Discussion of "The What-If Question"

By Bradley Martin, Asia Times, Bangkok

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March 15, 2000

I. Introduction

The following are two responses to Policy Forum Online 00-02C by Bradley Martin. The comments are by Dr. Indong Oh, MD, and Dr. Hwal-woong Lee of Korea-2000.

II. Comments on Essay by Bradley Martin

1. Comments by Indong Oh

From "The What-If Question" To What Is Better A Response to Bradley Martin's Article

By Indong Oh, Korea-2000, Los Angeles

As an American observer of the current U.S. policy to both Koreas, I'd like to point out a couple of issues in Bradley Martin's article. He correctly analyzed that "A South Korean move to oust the Americans seems, in the short term, less likely than a decision on the American side."

That is the reason why I stressed the need for the U.S. to act, as it has always called the shots by itself according to changing American interest. Examples are the introduction and withdrawal of nuclear weapons in and out of South Korea, as well as the reversed decisions over the Nixon-Kissinger and Carter plans for U.S. troop withdrawal. Returning operational control of the South Korean military to the South Korean president would provide many options for a peace process in the Korean Peninsula. Once North Korea realizes that South Korea acts as its own boss, inter-Korean governmental dialogue can be promoted further, as the U.S. would like to see happen. It would also help pave the road for the implementation stage of the 1991 Basic Agreement between the North and South.

An ever-enlarging number of civic groups in various fields in South Korea are changing the mindset of South Koreans. When they awake from their illusions of North Korean invasion ingrained by 30-year long military dictators and by the U.S in recent years, they will realize who North Koreans are to them and the role of the U.S.

Mr. Martin's comparison of the Korean problem to that of Taiwan and China is far from true. The U.S. did not fight directly against communist China for the nationalists as it did for S. Korea. The U.S. never invaded China as it did to North Korea to exterminate it. The U.S. has not deployed its troops directly against China as it has against North Korea and regularly carries out large-scale war exercises. Aspiration for unification of South and North Koreans is too great to be compared to that of China or Taiwan.

The "endgame" in the case of Korea started when the war ceased by armistice almost half a century ago. It simply has dragged on for too long. The U.S. can end the "endgame" without jeopardizing its interest in peace and stability in the North East Asia.

2. Comments by Hwal-Woong Lee

In Answer to "The What-If Question"

By Hwal-Woong Lee March 31, 2000

Asia Times' Contributing Editor Bradley Martin's article "The what-if question" represents a typical pro- USFSK (U.S. Forces in South Korea) theory which presupposes the following: 1) North Korea is a rogue regime and its leaders are villains; 2) Once U.S. troops are pulled out, the North will quickly attack the South; and 3) If attacked by the North, the South will not be able to sustain it.

For an equitable assessment of what North Korea and its leaders are about, a brief account of how Korea was divided and why the North initiated the Korean War may be in order. During the thirty-five years following the colonization by Japan in 1910, some Koreans collaborated with the Japanese. But most Koreans refused the Japanese rule and tried to overthrow it in one way or another. These patriotic movements were split into two factions: one resorted to armed resistance and the other favored diplomatic approach. The former group, with the help of Chinese and Soviet communists, kept fighting strenuously against the Japanese until the end of World War II, whereas the latter, with some minor exceptions, gradually succumbed to, and even collaborated with, the Japanese.

With the end of World War II, the U.S. divided the peninsula and proclaimed an anticommunist military government in the southern half. It then helped the coalition of right wing elements and pro-Japanese collaborators to establish the Seoul government. Unable to secure a political foothold in Seoul, the left wing elements, many of them by then sworn communists, set up the Pyongyang government with Soviet blessing. Thus, one Korea became two Koreas: one run by anti-Japanese and the other by pro-Japanese forces.

To North Korean leaders who had fought fiercely against the Japanese, their revolution was not over yet until the pro-Japanese collaborators in the Seoul government were eliminated. The Korean civil war thus erupted in 1950. To call North Korean leaders villains or thugs because they initiated the Korean War is, therefore, historically inapt. They certainly are enforcing dictatorship and harsh rules on their people. They certainly are engaged in weapons of mass destruction (WMD) projects while their people are starving. But how could they do otherwise if they are to defend themselves from the continuous menace of the U.S., the world's strongest country that had once invaded their soil with the clear purpose of exterminating them from the earth? Under such circumstances, how long could they survive if they adopted a western style democracy?

Will North Korea attack the South as soon as the USFSK pulls out from the South? And will South Korea inexorably collapse when attacked by the North if the USFSK is not there? I don't think so. But I know that there are people who think so, including some negatively brainwashed South Koreans. I, therefore, admit that it is important to devise some adequate means to ease such fear in order to bring about an actual withdrawal of the USFSK.

My proposal is two pronged. The first is that the withdrawal of the USFSK should be carried out simultaneously and in line with the mutual non- aggression pledges by the two Koreas and the U.S., accompanied by the substantial and verifiable arms reductions in the Korean peninsula, including North Korea's renunciation of its WMD projects. This will preclude the possibility of both the recurrence of conflicts in the peninsula and the escalation of an arms race between the North and South. The second is that the peace and security in the post-USFSK Korean peninsula should be safeguarded and guaranteed by a regional security organization. Such an organization should be composed of the two Koreas, the U.S., China, Japan and Russia with a mission to oversee and guarantee, in a multilateral setting, the peace and security not only in the Korean peninsula but also

in the region as a whole.

It is fallacious to think that there is peace maintained in the Korean peninsula thanks to the presence of USFSK. The truth is rather opposite. Most of all, the presence of USFSK is very much a factor contributing to the plight of the North Korean people. It also serves as the hotbed for South Korea's political turmoil, social injustice and general corruption. Furthermore, it is the decisive factor that obstructs the opportunities for the Korean people to explore the possibility of peaceful reunification. The mere likelihood of U.S military intervention in case of China's use of force has been effectively discouraging the chance of talks between Beijing and Taipei. Needless to say, the actual U.S. military presence in the Korean peninsula could in no way act as a contributing factor to Korean reunification.

It is unrealistic to expect a sustainable peace in Korea without realizing the reunification of the country. And, it is impossible to envision a permanent peace in East Asia without a sustainable peace in Korea. The U.S. policy to serve as a guarantor of peace in East Asia, therefore, should not be implemented in a fashion counteractive to the cause of Koreans long-held aspiration for reunification. A planned and phased pull out of the USFSK, accompanied by simultaneous and verifiable non-aggression pledges and arms reductions, will open the way for "Koreans themselves to traverse to the road of peace and reunification," as former Secretary of State James A. Baker III once put it. This will not necessarily deprive the U.S. of its opportunity to play a role of guarantor of peace in East Asia. By sponsoring a regional conference of peace and security, the U.S. will be able to secure appropriate means of re-deploying its forces as a guarantor of regional security in some part of Asia, including Korea, with the consent of the countries of the region concerned.

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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