Nautilus Institute PFO 00-05: Koreans Take Steps to Solve Their Own Problems

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U.S. Responsibility to Support the Korean Accord

By Hwal-Woong Lee

CONTENTS

I. Introduction

II. Essay by Hwal-Woong Lee

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

Discussion

Go to essay by Timothy L. Savage

June 26, 2000

Go to essay by Victor Cha

June 27, 2000

Go to essay by Peter Hayes

June 29, 2000

Go to essay by Han Sung-Joo

July 11, 2000

I. Introduction

This is the fourth in a series of articles on the recent ROK-DPRK summit. This essay was contributed by Hwal-Woong Lee, Senior Advisor to Minjok Tongshin (LA-based Korean-American Web Daily). Formerly, Mr Lee served as a Foreign Service Officer of the ROK Foreign Ministry (1956-71), ROK Consul in Los Angeles (1968-71), President of Korea Reunification Forum in LA (1994-95) , and Fellow at Korea 2000, an LA-based research council on Korean reunification (1997-99).

Lee argues that the US, as the country responsible for the division of the Korean Peninsula and the main supporter of the ROK, has an obligation to support the ROK-DPRK accord. He further argues that the only way to get the DPRK to abandon its weapons programs is to withdraw US troops from the ROK.

II. Essay by Hwal-Woong Lee

The accord reached between the two Korean leaders, Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il, is dramatic and historic. Koreans both in the North and South are naturally ecstatic about it. The U.S. response, however, has been rather tepid. President Clinton expressed his lukewarm support. And many policy makers and analysts have shown skepticism, especially on the motive behind the northern Kim's sudden openness to the South.

The tempo of the events in Pyongyang last week may have exceeded Washington's expectation. But a candid retrospection of post-World War II U.S.-Korean relations suggests that it is time for the U.S. to accept the reality as it is and retool its Korea policy accordingly. It was the U.S. that drew the dividing line across the Korean peninsula at the 38th parallel in 1945. In 1948, it helped consolidate the division by sponsoring the birth of the Seoul government, which in turn expedited the advent of a competing government in Pyongyang. Thus the stage was set for an inevitable civil war in Korea.

When the Korean War broke out in 1950, the U.S. immediately went to the rescue of South Korea, for which South Koreans are thankful even today. Research works by many scholars, however, indicate that the U.S. had prior knowledge of North's plan to invade the South as well as the intelligence reports on the imminence of the North's attack. U.S. officials were also well aware of

South's inability to defend itself against the North. Yet, the U.S. chose to withhold or delay military aid to the South because it wanted to have the North attack and overrun the South first and give the U.S. justification to interfere in the civil war.

After repelling North Korean forces to the north of the 38th parallel, which took only three months, the U.S. opted to invade North Korea, thereby inviting the Chinese intervention and prolonging the war for three years. The Pentagon's recently revised Korean War death toll is 36,940. But the figure would have been only 5,567 had the War not been escalated to the North.

The American soldiers, however, did not lose their lives vainly in Korea. Their sacrifices acquired for the U.S. a bridgehead on the Asian continent to serve its policy of securing a dominant position in North East Asia. The U.S. still maintains some 37,000 troops in South Korea as the backbone of its Asia policy. It even envisages to keeping them there even after the two Koreas are reunited. The Korean War also rejuvenated the then-dormant American patriotism and helped to line up international support for U.S. crusade against the advance of communism, laying the foundation for eventual victory over Soviet Russia in the ensuing cold war.

South Koreans, of course, have benefited from their alliance with the U.S. This benefit, however, was accorded only at the expense of their brethren in the North, who bore the brunt of sanctions and punishments for disobedience to world's strongest country. But Koreans have by now realized that they cannot live in peace unless the division is overcome and the reunification is attained. This is clearly manifested in the very first item of agreement in the two Korean leaders' Joint Declaration, which says: "The South and the North have agreed to resolve the question of reunification through concerted and independent efforts of the Korean people themselves who are their own masters."

Unfortunately, it is reported that the U.S. remains determined to keep its forces in South Korea despite the Korean reconciliation because North Korea did not agree to undo its nuclear and missile projects. This argument distorts the facts. North Koreans arm themselves heavily because their very existence is threatened by the presence of U.S. military on their doorstep. The truth, therefore, is that the presence of U.S. forces in Korea is the very cause of the tension in Korea.

If the U.S. agrees to pull out its forces from Korea, the North would have no reason to stick to its projects for weapons of mass destruction, especially when the animosity and enmity between the two Koreas have now been abandoned. If the U.S. objective in Asia is genuinely peaceful, not hegemonic, it should withdraw its forces from South Korea. It should then work out some arrangements with other countries of the region concerned where U.S. forces could, even after the withdrawal from South Korea, be re-deployed in some part of Asia as a guarantor of regional peace.

Last June 25 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Korean War. It is principally Koreans themselves who have to be blamed for failing to make reconciliation for so long. But the U.S. should also share at least some responsibility for the tragedy and the tribulation sustained by the Korean people because it at least initiated and has taken advantage of the misfortune in Korea to serve its own purposes. Koreans themselves have now decided to make peace and exchanged pledges of working together for their reunification. At this juncture, it is the moral responsibility of the U.S. to support the Korean people's efforts to realize their long-held aspirations.

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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Return to top
back to top

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