

Policy Forum 03-22A: Korean Nuclear Crisis: Benefits of a Multilateral Approach



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Korean Nuclear Crisis: Benefits of a Multilateral Approach

By Moon Hayong

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay by Moon Hayong](#)

[III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses](#)

I. Introduction

This paper was presented on March 14, 2003 at a meeting of the North Pacific Working Group of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). Delegates from both the DPRK and the ROK were in attendance, along with 40 international officials or academic experts who attended as private citizens.

Moon Hayong is Director-General for Policy Planning, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Republic of Korea. This article represents his own personal views as expressed at the 10th CSCAP North Pacific Working Group meeting at UC Berkeley, March 13, 2003.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by Moon Hayong

"Korean Nuclear Crisis: Benefits of a Multilateral Approach "

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While the Iraqi situation worsens with the prospect of imminent war, the world's attention is being drawn to the Northeast Asia region. Last October, North Korea's nuclear development program using highly enriched uranium was revealed. Since then, North Korea has taken a series of actions to the concern of the international community: it has unfrozen nuclear facilities by removing International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) surveillance equipment, expelled IAEA inspectors, announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and reactivated the 5MW nuclear plant in Yongbyong. North Korea has also threatened to reconsider its commitment to the Armistice Agreement of 1953. All these measures have left North Korea's nuclear development program unchecked and have raised the level of tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia.

North Korea asserts that the nuclear issue is a bilateral matter between the United States and North Korea and demands a non-aggression pact with the United States. The United States believes that this is an international issue related to the preservation of the nonproliferation regime, which needs the involvement of all major Northeast Asian neighboring countries. The recent incident in international airspace over the East Sea on March 2 where North Korea's fighters tried to intercept a U.S. reconnaissance plane at a threateningly close range clearly demonstrates the vulnerability of the security situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula.

The position of the government of the Republic of Korea on North Korea's nuclear issue is as follows: First, North Korea's nuclear development can never be condoned. Pyongyang must abandon its nuclear development program. Second, the North Korean nuclear issue should be resolved peacefully through dialogue. Third, South Korea is ready to play an active role in resolving the nuclear issues. To these ends, the ROK is strengthening its close coordination with the United States and Japan. It also maintains close cooperation with China, Russia, the European Union, and all other countries concerned.

It is reassuring to note that there is a consensus at a global level, particularly among the United States, China, Japan, Russia, the European Union, and other countries, on the need for

denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. There is also unanimous support for a peaceful resolution to North Korea's nuclear issue through dialogue. I believe that North Korea's nuclear development program will not serve its security at all. Instead, it will only damage the security of North Korea and that of the whole Northeast Asia.

At this juncture, I would like to highlight three dimensions of the North Korean nuclear issue: First, North Korea's nuclear issue is essentially of a global nature. It is a serious undermining, as well as a stark violation, of the international nonproliferation regime including the NPT, a cornerstone of international peace and security for more than 30 years. The basic nature of North Korea's nuclear issue warrants a multilateral approach.

Second, North Korea's nuclear issue runs directly counter to the spirit and letter of the 1992 Joint South-North Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. This makes the nuclear issue an inter-Korean problem that requires serious discussions between South and North Korea.

Since the summit between the two Koreas on June 15, 2000, South and North Korea have made remarkable progress in the development of inter-Korean relations. Today one can witness ministerial-level talks and joint works for the reconnection of railways and roads between the South and the North through the demilitarized zone (DMZ). The two Koreas are continuing economic cooperation projects such as the Kumgang mountain tourism project and the Kaesung industrial complex project.

The two Koreas opened direct routes in the sky, on the sea, and on land. The Korean government will build on this achievement to further develop a peaceful and cooperative relationship with North Korea.

At the same time, the ROK government will continue its utmost efforts to get North Korea to abandon its nuclear development program and reverse its measures taken so far through all existing dialogue channels. North Korea's nuclear issue puts in danger not only the on-going cooperation between the two Koreas but also the South Korean economy itself. South Korea's economy is currently suffering from slow-downed economic growth and a cold look from foreign investors mainly because of the unpredictability of the North Korean nuclear issue. Therefore, it should be resolved as soon as possible through peaceful means. It is particularly important for North Korea not to take any further destabilizing measures such as reprocessing spent-fuel rods or test-firing long-range ballistic missiles, which will gravely endanger the security of North Korea.

Once North Korea responds to the calls by the international community and abandons its nuclear development program, South Korea will be able to redouble its economic cooperation with the North, together with other neighboring countries, to assist North Korea's economic development.

Third, North Korea's nuclear issue has badly affected the status of the 1994 Agreed Framework, which has been considered a successful "aid for disarmament" deal. I view that there is a need for talks among the countries concerned in this regard.

In sum, reflecting on these three dimensions of North Korea's nuclear issue as a whole, I believe that the best way to handle this issue is through a multilateral approach. Within the framework of a multilateral meeting, there can be talks between the United States and North Korea and other bilateral meetings as necessary.

I believe that there are two concomitant benefits to the multilateral approach. One is that any security guarantee that can be extended to North Korea will be reinforced with endorsement by all participating states. Second is that economic cooperation with North Korea, which is expected to be

discussed following a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue, will be only substantial in a multilateral framework where the Republic of Korea, Japan, the European Union, the United States, and other key countries will be engaged. I strongly urge North Korea to respond to the calls by all neighboring countries to engage in a multilateral meeting in order to resolve the nuclear issue once and for all.

The government of the Republic of Korea, under the newly inaugurated President Rho Moo-hyun, will implement the "Policy for Peace and Prosperity," which aims at both promoting permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula and co-prosperity between the two Koreas. South Korea would also like to go beyond the area of the Korean Peninsula, to be an economic hub of Northeast Asia and to contribute to peace and prosperity of the region.

In the same vein, it is unfortunate that there is still not an intergovernmental forum in the Northeast Asia region to discuss security-related issues. The recent development underlines the necessity of such a multilateral security consultation mechanism. I understand that the complexity of the issues and different national positions in the region make it rather difficult to bring the countries of the region into an effective multilateral setting now. However, such difficulties should not be overly prohibitive against any effort to explore the possibility of establishing a multilateral security dialogue among states in Northeast Asia, which can play a crucial role in promoting confidence-building and preserving peace and security.

Such a multilateral security consultation mechanism can be initiated in a track 2 or track 1.5 setting, including the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), where government officials and non-government academics freely discuss ways to enhance regional security. Once mutual confidence has been accumulated and a common understanding on security related issues is being shared, I believe that the initial 2 or 1.5 track forum can gradually evolve into a security dialogue among governments of Northeast Asia. It may be a future we can move into, if we are determined to get ready.

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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