Policy Forum 03-21A: US Policy Toward the Korean peninsula and its Implication for northeast Asia

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By Kim Sam Jong

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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). The DPRK ambassador to the United Nations and two delegates from a Pyongyang defense think tank attended the meeting, along with 40 international officials or academic experts who attended as private citizens.

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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 Kim Sam Jong

"US Policy Toward the Korean peninsula and its Implication for northeast Asia"
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DPRK-US, inter-Korean, and DPRK-Japan relations, which remain abnormal even after an elapse of over ten years since the demise of the Cold War, are major unstable elements on the Korean peninsula and the rest of the northeast Asia region.

For the reason is that south Korea and Japan depend on the US security umbrella, they are not in a position to settle independently the issues concerning their relations with the DPRK.

Therefore, it can be said that inter-Korean and DPRK-Japan relations greatly hinge on progress of the DPRK-US relations.

Such reality on the Korean peninsula and the rest of northeast Asia bespeaks that the US policy toward the DPRK is a key factor in removing unstable elements in the region.

Accordingly, it is necessary to analyze US policy toward the Korean peninsula and its impact on security in northeast Asia.

US Policy Toward the Korean peninsula

It is considered that during over 50 years of US involvement in issues of the Korean peninsula, the United States mapped out its policy toward the Korean peninsula in a way favorable to contain the role of other powers in northeast Asia and exercise its influence in the region.

Therefore, in the Cold War era the US policy toward the Korean peninsula was to keep a hold of south Korea while isolating the north with the ultimate goal of establishing a pro-US, unified state

based on a "free and democratic system" involving whole of the Peninsula.

After the end of the Cold War, the United States showed signs of altering its policy which had been maintained for several decades.

The DPRK-US Agreed Framework which was concluded in 1994 envisaged normalization of DPRK-US relations as well as the settlement of the nuclear issue.

The adoption of this agreement meant that the US intended to switch over its Cold War era policy to one of exercising its influence in northeast Asia in such a way as to bring close relations with the north and south of the Peninsula.

This was the first attempt to get rid of a Cold War policy on the part of the United States.

However, immediately after adoption of the DPRK-US Agreed Framework, the Clinton administration met with a strong rebuff from the Republican Party asserting that the Agreed Framework gave a shot in the arm to a "government faced with imminent collapse."

Upset by this, Clinton administration seemingly implemented the Agreed Framework, but it was not attentive at all to fulfilling its obligation under the Agreed Framework of normalizing DPRK-US relations.

Certainly, it put off drastically the construction of the light-water reactors under the Agreed Framework.

Contrary to the prediction of the United States, however, the DPRK grew stronger, not "collapsed."

The Clinton administration was compelled to recognize this fact.

Therefore, in its last year, the Clinton administration moved to recognize the sovereignty of the DPRK and normalize DPRK-US relations.

This was the second attempt to get off pursuing a Cold War policy.

But after the Bush administration took office, DPRK-US relations reverted to its origin.

In particular, from the end of last year, DPRK-US relations lapsed into their worst state, owing to the nuclear issue raised by the United States.

In view of the policy that the Bush administration has pursued in more than 2 years wince it emerged, it may be said that the United States is aiming to prevent the DPRK from being a powerful and prosperous by posing military threat.

These facts show that the policy of the Bush administration toward the DPRK is a replica of its Cold War policy.

In order to achieve its policy objective, the United States is at present amassing its huge armed forces in and around the Korean peninsula under the pretext of the nuclear issue and posing a military threat, while staging all sorts of DPRK-targeted military drills.

Such being the reality, it is quite natural for the DPRK to further augment its defense capability, not to disarm itself.

At present the DPRK asserts conclusion of a legally binding DPRK-US non-aggression treaty to

resolve the nuclear issue in a fair way.

The DPRK does not wish for any reward with such an assertion.

This means that the United States should not pose a military threat to the DPRK so that it can live by itself on its own efforts.

The DPRK does not intend to threaten anyone. Its intention is only to defend its sovereignty and security in the face of the military threat from the United States, the only superpower in the world.

In this context, the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula is one to be settled by all means between the DPRK and the United States.

In order to put an end to the serious state of confrontation at present over the nuclear issue, it is necessary for the United States to abandon its policy of the cold war era and respond to holding the DPRK-US direct talks on an equal footing, and come out to conclude a DPRK-US non-aggression treaty.

If the United States comes along this way, that will be its third attempt to rid itself of its cold war confrontation policy.

Impact of US Policy Toward DPRK on Security of the northeast Asia Region

The United States regards the "security alliances" with Japan and south Korea as a cornerstone in its security strategy regarding northeast Asia while Japan and south Korea necessitate the security umbrella of the United States.

These tripartite relations are regarded as valuable even in the post-Cold War era.

For this reason, the United States feels concern about the settlement of inter-Korean and DPRK-Japan relations, since this would be a striking blow to its security strategy toward northeast Asia as long as DPRK-US hostile relations exist.

Therefore, when the United States was willing to work toward solving DPRK-US relations, it let north-south and DPRK-Japan relations improve, but when the United States intended to keep the DPRK-US confrontation, it attempted to hold in check inter-Korean and DPRK-Japan relations by all means.

The reality that the United States seeks to pursue its interests though the maintenance of DPRK-US hostile relations lays a barrier in regional security cooperation, because it blocks inter-Korean and DPRK-Japan relations, not to speak of causing tension.

This is substantiated by historical facts.

No sooner had the July 4 Joint Statement been published between north and south in the 1970s than the United States egged on the south Korean authorities to anti-DPRK confrontation to hamstring north-south relations.

And in the 1980s, when north-south dialogues were being brisk, the United States brought the dialogues to a rupture by launching the "Team Spirit" joint military exercises.

In the 1990s, too, when major agreements between the north and south were reached and the DPRK-Japan talks on normalization of bilateral relations started, the US blocked inter-Korean and DPRK-Japan relations by raising the nuclear issue.

Since the United States was willing to move toward normalizing DPRK-US relations in the last period of the Clinton administration, it had no objection to North-South relations proceeding briskly.

But after the Bush administration came to power, the United States called on south Korea to approach the issue of north-south relations subject to its approval, and to moderate the speed of this relationship while changing US policy to restore its confrontation with the DPRK.

Consternated by the favorable development of inter-Korean and DPRK-Japan relations, the Bush administration surprisingly kicked up fuss over the nuclear issue from the end of last year in order to block them.

Owing to this intervention of the United States, the opportunity for normalizing DPRK-Japan relations was blocked and north-south relations, too, underwent twists and turns, with the result that peace and security in northeast Asia are faced with serious crisis.

All facts show that the prospect of security on the Korean peninsula and in the rest of northeast Asia greatly depend on the US policy toward the Korean peninsula.

But if the United States continues blocking inter-Korean and DPRK-Japan relations, while proceeding with the DPRK-US confrontation, it cannot evade blame for maintaining a pretext for stationing US troops in south Korea by mitigating the heightening anti-Americanism through preserving tension on the Korean peninsula.

At the same time, the US cannot get rid of doubts about maintaining a justification of carrying out by force the missile defense program through continuing tension on the Korean peninsula and providing for the interests of US military industries.

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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