Policy Forum 05-70A: The Collision Between Nuclear Sovereignty and Nonproliferation

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By Cheong Wooksik

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I. Introduction

Cheong Wooksik, representative of CNPK (www.peacekorea.org/english), writes: "The six-party talks, which was primarily arranged to resolve the US-North Korean conflict, could serve as a good opportunity to make the idea of a nuclear-free Northeast Asia public."

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II. Essay by Cheong Wooksik

- The Collision Between Nuclear Sovereignty and Nonproliferation
by Cheong Wooksik

Even though there is certainly a tendency of identifying the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula as the one inherent to North Korea, the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula is largely raised on three levels. Above all, originating in the cold war and post-cold war era, nuclear weapon supremacy and unilateralism of the U.S., which is becoming more strengthened after inauguration of the Bush Administration, are now achieved on the Korean Peninsula. Several important factors in the arms race on the Korean peninsula have significantly escalated the possibility of a nuclear war on the Korean Peninsula. First of all, the U.S. already made plans for the use of a nuclear weapon during the Korean War period. In South Korea various weapons, of which their reach and nature are unclear, have been stationed according to the massive retaliation strategy by which team exercises for the use of nuclear weapons against North Korea in a crisis were carried out. Other significant issues are the Bush doctrine in which North Korea was mentioned as one of the targets nuclear first use and the invention of the small-sized nuclear warhead targeting at the North Korean underground bases. The reality of the nuclear threat involves the fact that these issues are not cleared out yet, although they exist as the main concerns. Therefore, we must pay attention to these essential issues.

As mentioned above, Korean society is insensitive to the nuclear threat brought by the U.S., and the reason is that basically, the U.S.-led 'nuclearism' has been also reflected in South Korea. It is also represented by the fact that raising US nuclear issues was prohibited under the security pledge, which was expressed as the nuclear umbrella policy, and the U.S.-Korea Alliance. The product of the anti-communist cold war era, which assumed that criticizing the U.S. nuclear policy endangers the security, and benefits North Korea, is still not dissolved. In the twenty-first century, while international society is criticizing the U.S. nuclear policy as strongly as the North Korean nuclear issue, those who criticize the U.S. policy in the Korean society still remain a minority.

Second one is the North Korean nuclear issue, which has been raised as the most significant point in the dispute on the Korean peninsula since 1990s. Confrontations and conflicts between the U.S. and the North concerning the North Korean nuclear threat have been the nature of the crisis, as well as the North Korean attempt to develop nuclear weapons, the threat itself. Why North Korea started to realize its potential to develop nuclear armaments, is closely related to the destruction of the cold war structure and the isolation of North Korea itself. As shown by the fact that the North signed the NPT because of Soviet pressure in 1980, North Korea didn't have strong need to possess nuclear weapons then, especially considering the conditions of the time when the Soviet as well as China existed as supports. Similar to South Korea, which is under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, the North also had its solid allies such as Soviet Union. It prevented the North from possessing nuclear weapons, as the U.S. similarly prevented South Korea to develop nuclear weapons.

However, Security environment was radically changed by the series of events: establishment of diplomatic ties between the Soviet Union and South Korea, followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and diplomatic ties between China and South Korea. Confronted with the fundamental changes of the security environment, the North made efforts for regime survival by consolidating the regime inside; pursuing the status quo or partial normalization of the relations with the South; and improving its relationship with the international society such as the U.S., Japan, and EU. In that process, the nuclear card played by the North began to play a big role in the improvement of the relations with the U.S. as well as in the guarantee of its survival in military sense. It can be compared to the regime of Park Jeonghee who, faced with the plan of the U.S. military withdrawal in South Korea by Nixon and Carter Administrations in 1970s, tried to develop nuclear weapons and missiles. This nuclear card also brought forth the Agreed Framework, which mainly concerns about the abandonment of the North nuclear program, the normalization of the relations between the North and the U.S., and the provision of alternative energies.

Despite its strategy for survival, the North was put between a rock and a hard place with the inauguration of the Bush administration. The Agreed Framework, which was expected to be the 'window of the opportunity' for its survival, fell to the 'swamp of betrayal', and the Bush administration is specifying its strategy of the pre-emptive strike including the use of nuclear weapons, adhering to the principle of non-comprise against the North and regarding it as the 'axis of evil'. The U.S. also continues with the invasive war on Iraq without any clear evidence about weapons of mass destruction. Given those circumstances and realities, it is at least a rather logical and natural process that the North is tempting to get nuclear armament to deter a possible US attack. In particular, the North regards the six party talks as the place to save time or for the justification of the U.S. for an attack against the North. Considering this, the reaction of the North to prepare for the 'failure of diplomacy' is a more realistic one. To the North it is naturally to assume that the failure of the talks would be the condition for the U.S. to use forces.

The third one is the collusion between the temptation of "nuclear sovereignty" that occurs due to the geographical location of the Korean Peninsula, surrounded by super powers, and the international nonproliferation system that does not tolerate nuclear armaments for South, North, or a unified Korea. This issue is one of the most structural problems of the nuclear issues on the Korean Peninsula. Among the four neighboring powers, three countries, USA, China and Russia are included in the 5 strongest nuclear powers in the world; Japan is a 'potential' nuclear power, able to produce hundreds of nuclear weapons within just a few years. For these reasons, the idea of possessing nuclear weapons may probably be a natural one for South, North, or a unified Korea. However, because of the geopolitical environment around the Korean Peninsula, possession of nuclear weapons would be impossible or bring more loss than gain to South, North, or a Unified Korea. The fateful dilemma, evolved between the temptation of nuclear sovereignty and the strong restraint of the nonproliferation system, was, is, and will remain a tough problem to solve.

This case of the collision of nuclear sovereignty and nonproliferation on the Korean Peninsula is in fact very suggestive for the problems that might come up in the future. A series of American policies since 1960s such as the Nixon doctrine, which said "Asian countries would be largely responsible for their own defense", the partial withdrawal of the US Army in South Korea, and the inauguration of the Carter Administration which promised the complete withdrawal of the US Army in Korea, were important factors that caused the Park Jeong hee regime to propel "Yulkog Enterprise" and to attempt to secretly develop nuclear weapons and missiles as means of 'self-defense'. South Korea's independent nuclear armament project failed because of the strong restraint of the US and also because the Jeon Doo Hwan regime, who came to power through a military coup, received guarantee for security pledge and approval of his regime from the Reagan Administration. This is a significant case. Without the end of the Cold War on the Korean Peninsula the argument of the "nuclear

sovereignty" could evolve further in the North if the threat of the U.S. increases. On the other hand, if the security pledge weakens, the same argument may be aroused in South Korea as "self-defense".

It is very likely that the argument of "nuclear sovereignty" will rise in the future in South, North, or a Unified Korea. As long as the threat from US continues, the temptation of the nuclear armament for North Korea will keep increasing. If the North's temptation becomes reality, South Korea may not be an exception of the nuclear domino effect in the middle or long term. As the Park Junghee regime has shown, the argument of "nuclear sovereignty" may possibly gain more power in South Korea if the US security pledge greatly lessens, for example by withdrawal of the US Army without improvement on the security environment on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. If the US-led trilateral Missile Defense (MD) among South Korea, Japan, and the U.S. is realized, China will increase nuclear capability at great scale and Japan might precede a nuclear armament project as a countermeasure to China. These conditions can stir Korean nationalism and act as an important factor provoking South Korea to insist on "nuclear sovereignty". In short, the collision between nuclear sovereignty and nonproliferation is not only a problem of the past and present, but also a problem for the future. For this reason, a lot of controversy about South Korea's nuclear test, aroused in September 2004, is one that shows there is an acute tension between nuclear sovereignty and nonproliferation.

The need for a creative alternative

Now South Korea is faced with a fateful dilemma resulted by the collusion between nuclear sovereignty and nonproliferation. Can it be an option for South Korea to remain, as it has been thus far, under the US nuclear umbrella? Or should it also have the nuclear card to play on its own, as some argue? These conflicting two arguments can be practically dubbed as "bandwagon" and "sovereignty" respectively, given the idea that both are, in effect, based on 'nuclearism', which intend to use nuclear weapons as a security measure.

During the Cold War, with North Korea allying with the former Soviet Union, a nuclear power, as well as China, it was rather inevitable for South Korea to be put under the US nuclear umbrella. It is also a stark reality that even now, when the Cold War is over worldwide and the socialist alliance between the Soviet Union, North Korea and China perished long ago, the US nuclear umbrella is still over South Korea to operate as deterrence against North Korea. Given that South Korea normalized diplomatic ties with China and Russia in the early 1990s and that the peace system where the South no longer needs to worry about the North's attack has been established, does South Korea still need nuclear umbrella from the US? Isn't the 'uncertainty of the future' becoming even more uncertain as people are still obsessed with the US nuclear umbrella, an 'archaic custom from the Cold War period', in this post-Cold War era?

It is true that, with the Cold War being finished and the renewed diplomatic ties with Russia and China, South Korea is now free from the fear of being attacked with nuclear weapons by these former enemies. If the endeavors to cooperate and to build a peace system with North Korea were to be succeeded, there would be no justification for the US nuclear umbrella, which has been there since the 1950s for a massive retaliation for a possible attack on the South from the North. In this sense, once the peace system in the Korean peninsula is established, the US's security pledge including its nuclear umbrella over South Korea will be subjected to criticism. "Against whose nuclear attack do we need the nuclear umbrella and Missile Defense (MD)?" will be one of the fundamental questions to be raised.

But that does not mean for South Korea that arming itself with nuclear weapons can be an alternative. As was seen in the North Korea's case, withdrawing from the Nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT) and striving to become a nuclear power itself will surely leave South Korea with

enormous economic, political and security burden. In addition, whether it is North Korea or the South, or even a unified Korea, it is for sure that the neighboring 4 countries, which regard nuclear-free Korean peninsula as a matter of life and death of their own, will instantly and strongly oppose to nuclear armament of the Korean peninsula. A nuclear arms race with neighboring powers is not an option, either. It will only worsen the security dilemma it is facing now. No way can nuclear weapons guarantee South Korea's security.

To get out of the fateful dilemma between nuclear sovereignty and nonproliferation, South Korea needs to seek a creative and active alternative. It should try to find the third way on which it can rely for its security by a nuclear power while at the same time neither depending on nuclear umbrella of a powerful country nor arming itself with nuclear weapons. The answer should be in accordance with NPT, which calls on all its member countries to concentrate on diplomatic efforts for the ultimate disarmament of all nuclear weapons while seeking a nuclear-free Northeast Asia as a transitional stage.

In a way, the so-called 'second North Korean nuclear crisis' that came out in the early 21st century can be an opportunity for South Korea to understand the nuclear issue on a more essential basis and as starting point for debate. It needs to ask the international community including its neighboring countries again how a denuclearized Korean peninsula can secure itself from nuclear powers. This is not a limited question within the specialty of the Korean peninsula instead it is directly related to the realization of the universal values to liberate Northeast Asia and even the world from the nuclear threat. Therefore, the six-party talks with the six Northeast Asian countries as its members also serve as a significant venue to raise such substantial questions.

Denuclearizing Northeast Asia may sound not realistic but more than half of the planet has already obtained a position as nuclear-free zone; Latin America and the Caribbean region by the Tlateloco Treaty signed in 1967, South Pacific region by the Lalotonga Treaty in 1985, Southeast Asia by the Bangkok Treaty in 1995, and Africa by the Pelindaba Treaty in 1996. Though a simple comparison of these regions with Northeast Asia would not be fair, it is still a problem that no attempt has been made to lay the cornerstone to resolve the nuclear dilemma the Korean peninsula faces and to improve mutual security in Northeast Asia. From the beginning of the 21st century, nuclear nonproliferation has been an important issue worldwide and in the center of the issue lies the Korean peninsula. Therefore it is possible for South Korea to win international support and cooperation for the peace in the Korean peninsula, but only by positively proposing a nuclear-free Northeast Asia.

There is also a chance to draw up a realistic plan for the nuclear-free Northeast Asia. Currently, of the six member countries of the six-party talks, Japan and both South and North Koreas are officially nuclear-free. A meaningful first step can be taken if the three nuclear-free countries sign a denuclearization treaty and get the other three countries-the US, China and Russia- guarantee not to use or threaten to use their nuclear weapons against the non-nuclear states. The six-party talks, which was primarily arranged to resolve the US-North Korean conflict, could serve as a good opportunity to make the idea of a nuclear-free Northeast Asia public.

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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