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Recommended Citation

Chung Oknim, "PRACTICAL STEPS FOR NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT", nuke policy, March 05, 2001, https://nautilus.org/nuke-policy/practical-steps-for-nuclear-disarmament-4/

"Partnership for Peace: Building Long-term Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia"
The Second Collaborative Workshop on East Asia Regional Security Futures

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

by Chung Oknim

ABSTRACT

The basis for maintaining peace and security in Northeast Asia has been provided by bilateral alliances and alignments. Yet, the new millennium brings with itself another re-arrangement in Northeast Asian power structure and coalition making. The Korean Peninsula has, more often than not, been considered a dangerous flashpoint in East Asia as it locates itself at the crossroads of great foreign powers and as historical events. An option for resolving the security conundrum on the Korean Peninsula is sub-regional multilateralism. With the start of a new century, a historic opportunity is upon Koreans to establish a six-party regime centered around the Korean Peninsula - not as a replacement - but as a supplementary mechanism for the existing bilateral ties. The confidence-building measures within such a regime would draw in the participation of both Koreas while serving to clearly define the role of the major outside powers in resolving the Korean conundrum peacefully. A secondary approach or stepping-stone for more institutionalized multilateralism was conducted in the name of minilateralism. KEDO and TCOG are representative cases of this approach. Trials and errors have been exhibited in the implemention of such minilateralism. However, if they prove successful, the experiments will eventually lead to an institutionalized form of multilateralism. Apart from efforts at minilateralism, a gradual step-by-step approach of function-oriented sub-regional multilateralism must be sought. South Korea is the strongest supporter for such a multilateral cooperation. Its North Korean initiative and the ultimate establishment of a multilateral security regime would strengthen its diplomatic credibility, both at home and abroad. This promising, though limited, approach of "functional multilateralism" would also identify issues where there is an overlap of interests and find mechanisms to address them. With the advent of the inter-Korean summit and peaceful mood on the Peninsula, some people have suggested that a group of nations provide economic assistance to the North in hopes of securing stability on the Korean Peninsula by collective provisions of loan and credit guarantees through a special trust fund. In this proposal, South Korea can play the role of a capital provider and risk guarantor for the remittance to North Korea. Supposing that North Korea might take a rather flexible gesture on its missile issue, the thorn in US-DPRK relationship, and the United States subsequently can make positive response, this proposal has several merits. First, South Korea can take initiative in dealing with North Korea with a more productive and long-term economic plan and create a situation in which North Korea will become dependent on South Korea. With this arrangement in place, the United States will not have to worry about burden-taking as a hegemony while Japan, China, and Russia can provide positive contributions as well. Over the long-term, this plan could facilitate the conversion of North Korea's military sector into an industrial base. Today's complex North-South Korean bargaining situation and the opening of more exchanges between the two will create greater opportunities for peaceful change on the Korean Peninsula. Functional multilateralism, with moderate ambitions and concrete proposals, can capitalize upon this historic diplomatic opportunity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Korean Peninsula has, more often than not, been considered a dangerous flashpoint in East Asia, as it locates itself at the crossroads of great foreign powers and historical events. Against this backdrop, the new millennium brings with it yet another re-arrangement in the Northeast Asian power structure and coalition making. The key factors will be the US-China relationship and the dynamics between North and South Korea. Regarding the Korean Peninsula, the overlapping interests between the United States and China have connected the two countries in a positive way thus far, despite the tension over NMD, Taiwan, and other issues. The process of managing transition the on the Korean Peninsula holds the potential to create new patterns of cooperation that would lay the foundation for a 21st century security architecture in Northeast Asia. Despite that potential, the task of shaping an enduring cooperative security mechanism in Northeast Asia will not be easy given the conflicting interests among the four major powers of US, China, Japan, and Russia, and the unique situation in North Korea.

One proposed option is sub-regional multilateralism. So far, the basis for maintaining peace and security in Northeast Asia has been provided by bilateral alliances and alignments. The United States has maintained close military alliances with Japan and South Korea. On occasion, these two bilateral alliances were operated as it were a trilateral alliance. Cooperation or mutual understanding between China and North Korea, between Russia and China, and between Russia and North Korea cannot be ignored, even if they are less extensive than the alliances between the United States and Japan and Korea. Bilateralism has been the most effective and practical mechanism for keeping the status quo in the region. For that very reason, sub-regional multilateralism, despite its desirability, never had the chance to take root in Northeast Asia. However, with the start of a new century, a historic opportunity is upon us to establish a six-party regime centered around the Korean Peninsula, not as a replacement, but as a supplementary mechanism for the existing bilateral ties. The confidence-building measures within such a regime would draw in the participation of both Koreas while also serving to clearly define the role of the major outside powers in resolving the Korean conundrum peacefully.

II. MINILATERALISM: FUNCTION AND LIMIT

"Minilateralism" was adopted as a secondary approach or stepping-stone for more institutionalized multilateralism. KEDO and TCOG are representative cases of this approach. Until early 2000, the minilateral setting has been proven an effective venue for negotiation and coordination, even though it has not, and may not, lead to the establishment of a multilateral regime in the region. Trials and errors have been exhibited in the implemention of such mini-lateralism. However, if they prove successful, the experiments will eventually lead to an institutionalized form of multi-lateralism.

KEDO was the first attempt at minilateralism. It was founded in 1995 to implement the Geneva Agreement signed between the United States and North Korea. By offering North Korea the incentives of access to heavy oil, and the construction of light water reactors, KEDO set the precedent as a functioning model of multilateral cooperation that dealt with Northeast Asian security—one that may lead North Korea to further engagement with the outside world. In implementing the LWR project however, KEDO faced dual difficulties: coordination among the member countries, and cooperation with its counterpart in North Korea. Now, the United States raises the issue of possible nuclear proliferation from the LWR project for the North. Some US experts suggest that the LWR project be transformed into a conventional power plant project, but this is not a simple matter for South Korea. The change in the project itself will incur a very large cancellation cost toward those involved with South Korea's nuclear power industry and the issues of special inspections for North Korea's past activities in their nuclear program is another serious concern.

Despite discussions about opportunity costs regarding the KEDO project, it is undeniable that KEDO laid the foundation for further use of minilateralism in resolving pending issues. Another example is the Four Party Talks which were held for the first time in 1997. The meetings were aimed at negotiating a formal peace treaty that would officially end the state of war that has existed on the Peninsula for five decades. However, the Four Party Talks turned out to be mere ceremonial gatherings with little substantive effect. Now the South Korean government is trying to reactivate the Four Party Talks in the form of a "two plus two formula," in which both North and South Korea would sign a peace agreement while the United States and China would endorse it as guarantors for the peace regime. The United States, a key actor in this mechanism, agrees with South Korea in principle. However, it does not place high value in this idea because it is concerned that the Four Party Talks will end up being another idea where talk dominates over results. Instead, the United States proposes a trilateral commission between the two Koreas and the United States to discuss arms control of conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction. Howver, the possibility of such a mechanism being realized is slim due to the strong opposition from South Korea which is afraid of being bypassed in the form of trilateral military talks.

The Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) was established in 1999 to seek close coordination and consultation between the United States, Japan, and Korea in resolving the North Korean conundrum. North Korea's missile development issue ranked at the top of the TCOG consultation. Yet, in the wake of not so highly coordinated actions of the inter-Korean summit, Secretary of State Albright's visit to the North, and Japan's decision to provide the North with huge amounts of food aid, internal grumbling and complaints about the mutual lack of coordination came to the fore. It is argued that the three countries took minimalist approaches in consulting with the other partners and as a result, each country's respective negotiation with North Korea fell under Kim Jong Il's control over the pace of bargaining. Because the three countries have a common interest in maintaining such a trilateral mechanism, it should be reinforced, especially given the US Administration's priority on alliance management and close coordination.

III. WHY FUNCTIONAL MULTILATERALISM?

Apart from efforts at minilateralism, a gradual step-by-step approach of function-oriented sub-regional multilateralism must be sought. South Korea is the strongest supporter for such a multilateral cooperation. From South Korea's viewpoint, its future security environment is inextricably linked to the vicissitudes in relation to the four surrounding great powers. By seeking the endorsement or implicit understanding by these powers, South Korea can improve its security environment while enhancing the durability of any agreement on the future of the Korean Peninsula. Originally, South Korea's pursuit of regional multilateralism had its objectives in opening a venue for official level dialogue with the North, via the involvement of neighboring powers. The historical summit between the leaders of the two Koreas opened the possibility of tectonic changes in terms of regional security, and in a sense, the advent of an inter-Korean summit and closer inter-Korean exchange might free South Korea from the political burden of pursuing sub-regionalism. Both Koreas declared that they would achieve reunification independent of outside pressures, thus perhaps reducing the value of a multilateral security regime. The Korean public hopes to see the Korean issue resolved by Koreans, while the big powers' interests and calculations are kept at bay. However, despite this seeming reduction to the potential of multilateralism, South Korea's North Korean initiative and the ultimate establishment of a multilateral security regime would strengthen its diplomatic credibility, both at home and abroad.

Coming out of its decades-long, self-imposed isolation, North Korea has aggressively engaged in a series of diplomatic initiatives to improve relations with foreign countries and join international forums in an apparent effort to gain international assistance. The recent stream of summit meetings between countries concerned will reach its climax with the second round of the inter-Korean summit. These bilateral dynamics between the countries in the region encourage progress on multilateral negotiations. Multilateralism complements, but does not conflict with, such developments. The logical basis for functional multilateralism is North Korea's recent desperation to improve its strapped economy. Kim Jong Il's most recent visit to Shanghai can be a sign of changed attitude on part of the North, if not a change in national strategy.

Whatever the intention, it is certain that the North would have to undertake drastic measures to improve its economy, which in turn, would become the key to preserving its own regime. In fact, the only way of reforming its most odd economic structure is to receive more assistance from outside world, particularly from China and South Korea. Yet, in terms of attracting foreign capital and investment, neither the Chinese model nor the Korean model is acceptable to North Korea. North Korea of the present has zero potential as a consumer market, no matter what the overseas Koreans may think when they invest in the North. It lacks the basic infrastructure to induce foreign investment. The Rajin and Sonbong example is a testament to North Korea's failure in inducing foreigners to invest in itself. Furthermore, even if foreign investment were to take place, North Korea's fear of capitalism contaminating its public may prove too big a risk for its regime to take, irrespective of economic wealth. This was not a concern for South Korea during its export-led industrialization movement during the 1960s. By the same token, when China decided to open its system, it did not have to worry about a possible absorption by Taiwan. North Korea, despite its efforts in developing special economic zones, has many dilemmas to face.

On the other side of the investment coin, Korea and China do not have the capacity to take on the burden in assisting the North. One way to mitigate this problem is to seek economic cooperation—functional multilateralism. Perhaps the most pragmatic solution is to pursue the establishment of ad hoc mini-multilateral institutions that are issue-specific, function-oriented. This more limited approach, focusing on functional areas where cooperation could be expanded with ease, offers the involved countries confidence that positive outcomes are likely, while the costs in case of a deterioration of that process will be minimized.(1) A regional agenda that goes beyond helping North Korea rehabilitate its ailing economy and respond to urgent environmental and maritime issues would help expand multilateral dialogue as well. Economic growth in North Korea, China, and Russia will only flourish with the removal of the old Cold-War barriers and the promotion of greater cross-border contacts, as was visible in the local farmers' markets established in North Korea during the food crises of 1996 and 1997.

A multilateral dialogue might also address region-wide concerns such as implementation of the Law of the Sea Convention in Northeast Asia or multilateral approaches to nuclear reprocessing and plutonium management. The area of energy cooperation holds perhaps the most promise for multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia. All the major actors have an interest in pipelines that transport natural gas from Russia and yet all have developed varying notions of how such a regional pipeline grid might work. There are adequate amounts of Russian gas from Iskutsk and East Baikal to meet long-term projected needs of Japan and Korea, as well as China, but such a project requires enormous financing. Other issues that lend themselves to multilateral cooperation are the development of the Tumen River Basin and the Yellow Sea area, natural gas pipelines from Siberia and the Sea of Okhost, and environmental pollution. All could be managed by such a Northeast Asian entity.(2)

This promising, if limited, approach of "functional multilateralism" would also identify issues where there is an overlap of interests and find mechanisms to address them. Such proposals as KADO (the Korean Peninsula Agricultural Development Organization) proposed by Ralph Cossa, PACATOM (the Pacific Atomic Energy Community) by Robert Manning, and other arrangements for economic and environmental cooperation are good examples of possible regimes. Nevertheless, it is controversial how effective and how plausible the proposals would be and to what extent the leaders of each country concerned would show interest in them. With the advent of the inter-Korean summit and peace mood on the Peninsula, some people suggest a group of nations providing economic assistance toward the North in hopes of securing stability on the Korean Peninsula by the means of collective provisions of loan and credit guarantees through a special trust fund. In this proposal, South Korea can play a role as a capital provider and risk guarantor for the remittance to North Korea. Supposing that North Korea might take a rather flexible gesture in its missile issue, which is the thorn in US-DPRK relationship, and the United States subsequently can make positive response, this proposal has several merits. First, South Korea can take initiative in dealing with North Korea with a more productive and long-term economic plan, which will create a situation in which North Korea will become dependent on South Korea. With this arrangement in place, the United States will not have to worry about burden-taking as a hegemon while Japan, China and Russia may provide positive contributions as well. Over the long-term, it may facilitate the conversion of North Korea's military sector into an industrial base.

IV. CONSTRAINING FACTORS

Interestingly, the two key actors in peace and stability on the Peninsula, the United States and China have little interest in multilateral arrangements to resolve the security puzzle on the Korean Peninsula. The United States has remained concerned that the institutionalization of multilateral security mechanisms might unnecessarily constrain its freedom of action in dealing with regional security affairs. Instead, the US has repeatedly emphasized its bilateral defense relationships as the foundation of American security policy in Asia. More comfortable with one-on-one approaches to security issues in Asia, US officials are rather hesitant to embrace and aggressively pursue a multilateral approach—particularly in addressing security concerns, and especially when the idea also draws skeptical responses from North Korea and China. U.S. opposition to multilateral dialogue has not been entirely consistent. It has considered multilateral security dialogue in Northeast Asia whenever the topic of US troop reduction in East Asia has arisen, as was the case during the early 1970s and early 1990s. In other words, when the security situation in Northeast Asia appeared relatively peaceful, the United States would speak of troop reduction (particularly on the Korean Peninsula), which in turn, resulted in discussions on multilateralism. On the other hand, Asian countries have spoke of multilateralism whenever they felt less assured of American commitment in the region.

However, in general, with its bilateral military alliances and skepticism toward multilateral approaches, the US is not eager to go down the path of multilateral security frameworks. The problem is not that the US is strongly opposed to the idea of multilateralism itself, but that it has not paid much sincere attention to the idea thus far. Multilateralism has also been viewed by the United States as something nice to have if the international community is ready for it, but unfortunately, in most cases, the international community has proven itself to be rather unprepared.(3) Yet if multilateralism in the region is going to move forward, it will require that the United States offer not only its support but also its leadership and vision.

Meanwhile, a key reason for China's lack of eagerness is its concern over Japan. China simply does not want to see Japan play an important role in security issues in a multilateral regional setting. On the other hand, there is some evidence that the Chinese leadership has decided that the multilateral security fora can be used to serve its own interests by emphasizing regional dialogues to challenge US leadership or undermine the US bilateral alliance structures.(4) Thus, for Beijing, multilateralism in Northeast Asia is a way to "tie China in" and to "tie the US down." Furthermore, China began to realize that it would help reduce fears of the "China threat" if China became actively involved in the multilateral fora. China may also see multilateral structures as support for its ideological insistence on the trend toward multipolarity, as opposed to an American-led Asian security order.(5) The Chinese are cultivating ties with Russia and promoting Asian economic cooperation as potential counterbalances to American power.(6)

China presumably wields influence over North Korea, as the latter depends upon the former for a good part of its fuel and food supplies. Interestingly, China has kept some distance from KEDO (the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization), arguing that it can better contribute to the success of KEDO by remaining outside the organization. Perhaps the major reason for the Chinese disinterest is the cost to be borne by KEDO members in building the two light water reactors for the North. On the other hand, China has displayed deep interest and active involvement in the Four Party Talks, particularly after North Korea finally agreed to participate. Furthermore, in early 1998, when South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung asked his Chinese counterpart to accept the proposed six-party declaration for peace and stability in Northeast Asia, China accepted it "in principle." In the short to medium term, China has the most to gain diplomatically from radically improved relations between North and South Korea and thus has thrived on the so-called "double-edged sword" approach of improving relations with both Koreas.(7) As the secret visit by Kim Jong-Il to China only a few days before the summit reflects, China has returned back on center stage in Korean affairs.

China shares many of the same objectives as the United States regarding the Korean Peninsula: it wants to keep Korea nuclear-free; and it wants stability to prevent either a refugee crisis or an armed conflict that could draw China in. To Beijing, a stable and friendly but divided Korean Peninsula is more desirable than Korea's rapid unification. Preferences for division aside, China has made contributions in its own right toward peace on the Korean Peninsula—as demonstrated during the North Korean nuclear and missile issues of the past few years. Beijing does not oppose closer bilateral relations between North Korea and the United States,. Nevertheless, several of its important interests do diverge from those of the US: most importantly, Beijing firmly opposes what it sees as Washington's troubling tendencies toward unilateral action. Like many other countries, China does not always support U.S.-led interventions in hot spots around the world. Therefore, China's position toward multilateralism will likely depend on the following three factors: the triangular relationship between the United States, Japan and China; progress in the US-DPRK relationship; and developments on the Korean peninsula.

V. CONCLUSION

Despite criticisms that multilateral security institutions are unlikely to result in tangible results, they allow counterparts in the region to meet regularly and exchange views. For example, track-two processes have been instrumental in creating and supplementing track-one processes. Multilateralism has also helped foster bilateralism by accommodating bilateral meetings during the multilateral forums. By the same token, the current bilateral structures of security relationships can advance multilateralism in the region by assuring a modicum of stability and creating imperatives for North Korea and China to participate in cooperative mechanisms. While multilateral cooperative security institutions are admittedly far less effective in defending against armed conflicts, they do have the ability to improve regional relations, promote confidence, and foster trust which, in turn, should help ameliorate the security dilemma and the reduce chances for accidental miscalculations.

Today's complex North-South Korean bargaining situation and the opening of more exchanges between the two will create greater opportunities for peaceful change on the Korean Peninsula. Functional multilateralism, with moderate ambitions and concrete proposals, can capitalize upon this historic diplomatic opportunity. By giving an indication of their flexibility and good will, and by demonstrating anew to the South Korean public the difficulties of dealing with the North, the South's leaders may also be able to gain public confidence—crucial to future efforts. Timing is important, and the stakes are high. Multilateral organizations seem to work when the underlying bilateral relationships are positive and when there are persuasive incentives for cooperation. Thus, the prospects for sub-regional dialogue will depend on national interests and on governmental will and leadership.

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(1) Ralph Cossa, "US Views toward Northeast Asia Multilateral Security Cooperation," op.cit.

(2) Robert A. Manning, "PACATOM: Nuclear Cooperation in Asia," The Washington Quarterly (20:2), pp.217-232.

(3) Wu Xinbo, "Prospect of Multilateral Security in the Asia-Pacific: A Chinese Perspective," in Asian Voices: Promoting Dialogue between the U.S. and Asia, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (February 22, 2000), p.19.

(4) Rosemary Foot, "China in the ASEAN Regional Forum: Organizational Processes and Domestic Modes of Thought," Asian Survey, vol. XXXVIII, no.5 (May 1998), pp. 425-440.

(5) The Office of the State Council of the PRC, China Defense White Paper (July 1998). See also: Jianwei Wang and Xinbo Wu, Against Us or with Us? : The Chinese Perspective of America's Alliances with Japan and Korea (Stanford: IIS, Stanford University, May 1998).

(6) Erik Eckholm, "China: Hedging Their Bets," The New York Times, March 25, 2001.

(7) Han Sung-Joo, "North-South Korea Summit Reflections," Pacific Forum CSIS (June 23, 2000).

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