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THE CHANGING SITUATION OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA AND ITS IMPACT ON SECURITY FUTURE

by JIN Guangyao

ABSTRACT

Great and positive changes have taken place on the Korean peninsula in the year 2000. The reconciliation, to a great extent, resulted from North Korea's positive response to an external environment favorable to it. The reconciliation influences not only the inter-Korean relations, but also geopolitics and the security situation in the region. The two Koreas have reached a mutual understanding about taking their destiny in their own hands and reducing the possibility of North-South conflict to a minimum. A new opportunity for multilateral cooperation is emerging and the Korea policies of China, Russia, the US, and Japan are being challenged. Since the beginning of improvements in inter-Korean relations, the security future on the peninsula has depended mainly on how the nuclear and missile issues between the US and North Korea is dealt with. North Korea has changed its fully close-door policy and expressed its will to resolve this issue through negotiation. Therefore, the position of the US, as a superpower with military presence in the region, is decisive in the future of inter-Korean peace and regional stability.

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the new century, great changes have taken place on the Korean peninsula. The relaxation of the tensions became the main trend in the 1990s when the Korean peninsula transformed from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period. Confrontation found expression and even led to crises on the brink of war. Since the clouds of the Cold War remained hauntingly, the international community was cautious about the security prospect on the peninsula. The year 2000, however, saw tremendous changes on the Korean peninsula (actually changes in North Korea's external policy), which went beyond the expectations of many Korea watchers: South-North summit meeting, North Korea's establishment of diplomatic relations with Italy, Australia, Canada and so on, Kim Jong Il's visit to China, US Secretary of State Albright's visit to Pyongyang. Why did the basic trends of confrontation and relaxation existed side by side in 1990s changed so rapidly in 2000? What impacts does the change have? How will it influence the future security of the Korean peninsula?

THE KOREAN PENINSULA DURING THE POST-COLD WAR PERIOD

In the 1990s, the structure of bipolar politics on the Korean peninsula which lasted for forty years changed with the end of the Cold war, and the ideological delimitation of states became less clear. As a result, the various original bilateral confrontations centered around the Korean Peninsula experienced various degrees of improvement.

To begin, South Korea's "Northern Diplomacy" led to the normalization of its relations with Russia (then Soviet Union) and China. "Cross recognition" became a reality by eliminating the Cold War's political and ideological divisions. North Korea, faced with the loss of its biggest ally after the collapse of the Soviet Union, began to adjust its foreign policy and shifted its diplomatic focus from its original ally to its former primary enemy, the United States. By successfully using the "Missile card," it began a bilateral dialogue with Washington.

Meanwhile, the dialogues between North Korea(DPRK) and South Korea(ROK) were strengthened, and even some significant breakthroughs were achieved. In September 1991, both North Korea and South Korea joined the United Nations, an act which implied that both sides had shifted the hostile policy of mutual non-recognition toward the policy of mutual co-existence. In 1992 both sides signed three agreements aimed at the relaxation of tension and the promotion of dialogue. Economic exchanges between the North and the South developed rapidly, the volume of trade increased from \$ 86 million in early 1990s to about \$ 300 million at the end of the decade.

International cooperation and multilateral dialogue concerning the Korean peninsula made great progress in the 1990s through the establishment of "Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization" (KEDO) and the beginning of the four-party talks among the United States, China, North Korea, and South Korea, talks intended to establish a peace mechanism on the Korean peninsula. There have been many preparatory and formal meetings conducted by the four-party talks since August 1997. In the Joint Declaration after the end of the fourth plenary session of the four-party talks, held in January 1999, the four parties announced the establishment of two groups on the establishment of a peace regime and the reduction of tension on the Korean peninsula.

Despite the positive developments as described above, the security situation on the Korean peninsula in the last decade of the twentieth century faced several difficulties and crises. At one point, there was even a danger of "a clash of the war." The security crises on the peninsula found expression in the following issues:

- 1) The nuclear and missile issues of North Korea have always been a focal point in the security situation on the peninsula. The problem of monitoring nuclear sites led to an increase in tension between North Korea and the US in 1993, but was eased by the Agreed Framework in October 1994. The launching of the "Taepodong" missile in August 1998 caused a missile crisis in Northeast Asia and almost at the same time, the problem of "Underground nuclear facilities" surrounding Kumchang-ri caused another new round of conflict between North Korea and the United States. At that time, the situation was in danger of escalating into a situation of war.
- 2) The North-South conflict was another source of tension. The military confrontation between North and South Korea formed by Cold War politics did not fundamentally change. 70 percent of the 1.8 million modern troops from the two Koreas were gathered along both sides of the military demarcation line, the highest concentration of troops in the contemporary world. As a result, small-scale conflicts frequently occurred throughout the 1990s, such as the grounding of the small North Korean submarine on a South Korean beach in August 1996, armed clashes in the area near the military demarcation line in July 1997, the discovery of the North Korean submarine in South Korean waters in 1998, and armed clashes conducted in the Yellow Sea by both navies in June 1999.

The fact that all crises took place between North Korea and the US, and North and South Korea indicates that North Korea is a key factor that has influenced the security situation in the region. However, if we ask why North Korea wanted to "ignite" the crises, we may have a deeper understanding of the causes of the tense situation. Let's take the nuclear and missile crises as an example. I would argue that North Korea's action is mainly a response evoked by an external environment unfavorable to it. For instance, Pyongyang's intention to renounce the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1993 could be seen as a response to the US ignorance of North Korea's proposal for replacement reactors in 1992 and instead resumption of Team Spirit military exercises with South Korea in March 1993. The launching of the "Taepodong" in August 1998 was just after the US rejection of Pyongyang's offer to negotiate an end to its exports and the development of new missiles. After it shifted its diplomatic focus on the US in the early 1990s, North Korea tried to place its relations with the US above its relations with South Korea, in order to create a more favorable situation for itself. However, due to the huge gap in power between the two countries, North Korea could not develop its relations with the US according to its own wishes. On the contrary, it always felt threatened by the US with its military presence on the peninsula and its ROK military alliance. Therefore, North Korea, unwilling to submit itself to the US, adopted various diplomatic and other strategies (including a strategy of brinkmanship) to contend with the US. This was the source of the security crises on the Korean peninsula in 1990s.

THE CHANGING SITUATION AT THE TURN OF NEW CENTURY AND ITS IMPETUSES

Great and positive changes have taken place on the Korean peninsula in the year 2000 beyond the expectation of most observers. The changes, to a great extent, are the changes of North Korea's foreign policy.

1. Kim Jong Il's landmark summit meeting with Kim Dae Jung was one. This is the first meeting between the highest leaders of North and South Korea in history, marking a breakthrough after the confrontation and conflicts between North and South Korea for 50 years.

2. Major changes of North Korea's policy towards the West was another. In 2000, North Korea actively carried out full-scale diplomacy: normalizing relations with Italy, Australia and Canada, and joining the ARF. Meanwhile, DPRK-US relations has developed. Kim Jong Il's special envoy Cho Myong Lok visited Washington and US secretary of State Albright visited Pyongyang in October 2000 respectively, the first high-ranking official visits between the two countries. All these events indicate that North Korea, which closed its door for such a long time, has begun to step up to international community.

3. Kim Jong Il's promotion of the relations with China and Russia also played an important role. The "Northern Triangular relationship" among DPRK-China-Russia used to be the cornerstone of North Korea's diplomacy, but it ceased to exist after Russia and China established diplomatic relations with the ROK respectively. In May 2000, just before the inter-Korean summit, Kim Jong Il visited China, the first foreign country he visited as the head of North Korea. In July, President Putin became the first Russian head of state who visited Pyongyang. In January 2001 Kim Jong Il visited China for the second time within seven months. Later this year, he will pay a visit to Moscow. Obviously, North Korea not only has improved its relations with China and Russia, but also attaches great importance to these relations, especially relations with China.

The reconciliation on the Korean peninsula, to a great extent, resulted from North Korea's positive response to an external environment favorable to it, just as the security crises in 1990s resulted from North Korea's response to an external environment unfavorable to it.

By an external environment favorable to North Korea I mean the policy adjustment by South Korea and the US toward the DPRK. Kim Dae Jung, after taking office in February 1998, has been showing his goodwill to improve the relations with North Korea by doing away with an "absorptive reunification" policy and pursuing "Sunshine Policy." He called for the dismantling of the Cold War structure and the transformation of inter-Korean relations from mutual distrust and confrontation into reconciliation and cooperation and proposed a summit meeting. The Sunshine policy dispelled North Korean misgivings over "absorptive reunification" and resentment towards the improvement of inter-Korean relations. The US policy adjustment toward the DPRK can be seen in the Perry Report, which put forward a three-stage implementation of policy towards North Korea. In the first stage, it urged the North to refrain from launching a long-range missile while calling on the US to lift some portions of the economics sanctions. Then, the US should secure a "reliable guarantee" from the North for suspending its nuclear weapons and missile programs all together. In the third stage, there would be an end of the Cold War structure and the establishment of a relationship of peaceful coexistence. Actually, the goal of the first stage was achieved after the Berlin talks between the U.S and North Korea in September 1999. The Perry Report symbolized the change in the US North Korea policy from full containment to engagement, which, to some extent, mitigated North Korea's fear of subversion by the US.

Meanwhile in North Korea, Kim Jong Il, experiencing an interim period after the death of Kim Il Sung, consolidated his power base by promoting the second generation of political elite to the top level and survived the worst economic situation in North Korean history. In 1998, Kim, elected as chairman of the Defense Committee, called for "Building Up Strong, Great Nation", indicating his confidence in political stability and his eagerness for economic reconstruction. With external pressures eased, Kim Jong Il made a decision to adjust his foreign policy, which finally resulted in the reconciliation on the peninsula.

THE IMPLICATION OF RECONCILIATION ON THE PENINSULA

The reconciliation on the Korean peninsula symbolized by the Summit Meeting has influenced not only inter-Korean relations, but also geopolitics and the security situation in the region.

1. Both North and South Korea have reached a mutual understanding in dealing with the peninsula issue independently. The Korean peninsula, known as the "Asian Balkan", has long been an arena of fierce rivalry among great powers. Even during the post-Cold War period, the great powers concerned have decisive influence on the Korean Peninsula. In the Joint Declaration dated June 15, however, the two Koreas declared: "The South and North have agreed to resolve the question of reunification independently and through the joint effort of the Korean people, who are masters of the country," making it crystal-clear that the two Koreas would aim to be free of non-Korean pressures as far as reunification was concerned. The rise of an independent sense and North-South consensus will make the Korean nation play an unprecedented role in the region.

2. The possibility of North-South conflict has been reduced to a minimum. As discussed above, the North-South conflict used to be one of the sources for the tense situation on the peninsula. Though the Joint Declaration failed to touch upon issues such as the relaxation of the military confrontation, both sides have stopped slandering each other along the military demarcation line. In September 2000, the North and South Korean defense ministers held a talk, the first of its kind, discussing the ease of military tension between the two sides. This will lay a foundation for independent and peaceful reunification, even though reunification is still far from realization.

3. A new opportunity for multilateral cooperation is emerging. Though multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia has been advocated by many people, it has made little progress, especially in the security circle where there is no multi-channel involving all countries concerned. After North Korea joined ARF, however, all Northeast Asian countries and countries with a stake in the region can now discuss matters of common concern at the same forum. This will inevitably promote multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia. Moreover, the reconstruction of "Seoul-Shinuizu Railway" after the Summit Meeting will make it possible for the extension of a Euro-Asian Continent Bridge to the Korean peninsula will provide convenient transportation for the Tumen River Economic Developing Zone. With economic cooperation between North and South Korea and other countries concerned, the increase of common interests among these countries will help regional stability.

4. The Korea policies of the four powers of US, China, Russia, and Japan are challenged. With the reconciliation of the situation on the peninsula, every power has to adjust its Korea policy in order to guide North-South relations to develop to its advantage and at least prevent them from developing to its disadvantage.

A. The US. The US has played a dominate role on the Korean issue for a long time, and North Korea has tried to place its relations with the US above its relations with South Korea. However, the process of the reconciliation is pushed forward not by DPRK-US relations, but by North-South relations, which put the US in a diplomatically and strategically difficult position. With the improvement of inter-Korean relations, the divergence of policies between the US and South Korea will emerge. The US always gives first priority to the nuclear and missile problems while South Korea does not press North Korea on these issues. Therefore, the US must make efforts to keep a new balance between North Korean policy and traditional US-ROK alliance. Moreover, though Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il do not completely oppose the US military presence after reunification, the US will be under a heightened pressure by Korean nationalism aroused by the Summit.

B. China. China enjoys a distinctive position on the peninsula by keeping good relations with both North and South Korea. It is generally thought that China, owing to Kim Jong Il's visit to Beijing before the Summit, has benefited the most from the reconciliation. The major goal of China's Korea policy as evidenced by Chinese domestic reform policy, is peace and stability in the region. Seeing the peaceful and independent reunification after being in keeping with its national interests, China supports the improvement of inter-Korean relations and is willing to play a constructive role in it.

C. Russia. Having realized the risk of being expelled from the Korean peninsula because of its own policy mistakes, Russian began to change its Korea policy in the mid-1990s. After Putin took office, Russia is more eager to promote its relations with both North and South Koreas. In July 2000, Putin visited Pyongyang and in February, Putin visited Seoul. Therefore, the reconciliation provides a new opportunity for Russia to return to the Korean peninsula. The influence of Russia on the peninsula, however, cannot be compared with that in the past. How to guide a changing situation to develop the Russian advantage will test Putin's political wisdom.

D. Japan. The reconciliation on the Korean peninsula are both advantageous and disadvantageous to Japan. Japan welcomes the improvement of inter-Korean relations because it helps regional stability and reduces Japanese misgiving over security. It is also inevitable for the normalization of Japanese-DPRK relations. However, Japan worries that the situation will be more complicated. The US-Japan-ROK cooperation is a cornerstone of Japan's Korea policy. It is now difficult to judge how the improvement of inter-Korean relations will influence the US-Japan-ROK cooperation, but it can be sure that Japan will feel more pressure when North Korea occupies a favorable position during bilateral talks. In addition, Japan will face a tough question that what attitude a reunified Korea will take toward Japan.

PROSPECTS FOR SECURITY ON THE PENINSULA

The security situation of the peninsula depends on North and South Koreas and the related powers of the US, China, Russia and Japan. However, capabilities for exerting influence on regional security differ greatly among states. That both crises and reconciliation resulted from North Korea's response to external environment indicates that North Korea has the initiative in affecting regional security, though it is a relatively weak state in Northeast Asian international relations.

As discussed above, the security crises on the Korean peninsula during the post-Cold War period were expressed as the nuclear and missile issues between the US and North Korea, and North-South conflicts. Since the possibility that the latter issue will lead to a new crisis is reduced to a minimum, we focus on the former issue.

Owing to North Korea's 'closed-door' policy and minimal knowledge of this reclusive state, it has long been held that North Korea is an unstable and unpredictable factor affecting the international relations and security situation in Northeast Asia. So when North Korea began to change its foreign policy in 2000, many people asked whether North Korean initiatives were strategic or merely tactical in nature? Up to now, one year after its normalization of relations with Italy, North Korea has still been promoting its relations with the Western countries. Moreover, Kim Jong Il visited China in January 2001, the second time within seven months. His visit to Shanghai, the most prosperous and open city in China, is a strong indication of his intention to begin reform at home. It is still too early to judge that North Korea has begun a strategic shift, but I think one thing can be sure - that North Korea has changed its fully closed-door policy and has been moving toward participation in the international community. This will reduce the unpredictability and is of significance for the security future on the Korean peninsula.

From this perspective, I think the missile issue will possibly not ignite DPRK-US conflict and lead to a crisis if the issue is dealt with properly. As mentioned above, the missile crises in the 1990s resulted from North Korea's response to an external environment unfavorable to it. Recently North Korea said it will reconsider its standing on nuclear and missile issues because the Bush administration will take a hard line toward North Korea. But North Korea also said that if the US will not threaten its security and take measures to reduce animosity, it will dispel the US misgivings over security. The US replied that it will continue reconciliatory policy towards North Korea based on the Agreed Framework. This is a cautious and positive reply. We learn from history that the best way to prevent a missile issue from igniting into a crisis on the Korean peninsula is to make North Korea feel safe. Otherwise, the missile issue will still be a card which North Korea can play against the US.

The missile issue involves complicated problems such as economic compensation that North Korea have put forward, and the launching of North Korean satellites. However, if North Korea and the US can settle these matter in a way that is satisfactory to both sides, North Korea, standing with South Korea, will probably make a compromise on the US military presence on the peninsula. If so, there will be no major obstacle to the development and normalization of DPRK-US relations, and in turn there will be a bright prospect for regional security.

On the other hand, the Bush administration has already shown its strong position on such foreign and security affairs as NMD program and air attacks on Iraq. Therefore, the possibility that the US takes a hard line on the North Korean missile issue cannot be fully excluded. If so, the possibility of conflict between North Korea and the US over the missile issue will increase greatly. This is a scenario all sides must avoid.

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