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Achieving a Nuclear-Free Northeast Asia

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The first step calls for South Korea, North Korea and Japan to form the core of the zone as nonnuclear states. Concurrent with this, China, Russia and the United States will extend legally binding guarantees to these three countries that they will engage neither in nuclear strikes nor threats of such aggression.

The Preparatory Committee for the Review Conference of the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) convened in Geneva in late April. For our nonprofit organization, Peace Depot, this gathering was notable for the fact that we became the first Japanese nongovernmental organization to be given the opportunity to present its views at this official venue.

As so well reported in the media of late, North Korea has apparently chosen to withdraw from the NPT. Within the shifting and unstable international landscape following the war in Iraq, meanwhile, the security of Northeast Asia has emerged as a critical concern for the international community. It is highly significant, therefore, that Peace Depot was able to propose its concrete vision for bringing peace to this region in the presence of the various government representatives.

The United States, backed by massive military might, has been in effect thumbing its nose at the multilateral system of late. In view of this, the time is ripe for NGOs to speak out against this position, and convey their conviction that it is indeed the restoration of the authority and function of multilateral conferences that is the high road to the forging of a lasting and reliable peace.

In our opening statement, which I personally delivered, my intent was to appeal to North Korea to return to the NPT fold. As the International Court of Justice noted in a 1996 advisory opinion, the NPT provides a precious cornerstone in multilateral efforts to eradicate nuclear weapons. Specifically, the court has advised that all signatory nations have ``obligation to bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament.'

North Korea has stated its position as follows: "Though we are withdrawing from the NPT, we have no intention of building nuclear weapons.' North Korea thus claims to remain among the ranks of nonnuclear states at the present time.

In addition to continuing to press North Korea to rejoin the NPT, there is yet another potent method of containing the ``nuclear volatility' of this region: moving toward the establishment of a Northeast Asia nuclear weapon-free zone.

We are well aware of a precedent that the Latin America Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (Tlatelolco Treaty) maintained nonnuclear Latin America and thus contributed to regional security before Brazil, a nuclear-technology power of the region, joined the NPT in 1998. In this sense, the creation of a nuclear weapon-free zone in Northeast Asia would hold even greater significance in engineering the transformation of the security framework of the region.

Northeast Asia is currently divided into two blocs largely defined by the presence or absence of military alliances with the United States-a superpower from outside the region. U.S. military might is currently the deciding factor in defining the security equation for the region. But unfortunately, the fallacy inherent in this structure has never been clearer, as moves toward nuclear proliferation are taken in Northeast Asia. Yet, this is a region that should be painfully aware of what horrors lie at the opposite pole of security. Several hundred thousand Japanese and another 100,000 ethnic Koreans mostly displaced from the Korean Peninsula ended up as atomic bomb victims in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Northeast Asia nuclear weapon-free zone concept, which I refer to as the "3+3 formula,' is a realistic approach rooted in the policies already affirmed by the countries involved.

In a nutshell, based on the 1992 joint declaration by North and South Korea pledging to achieve a nonnuclear Korean Peninsula and Japan's three nonnuclear principles, the first step calls for South Korea, North Korea and Japan to form the core of the zone as nonnuclear states. Concurrent with this, China, Russia and the United States will extend legally binding guarantees to these three countries that they will engage neither in nuclear strikes nor threats of such aggression.

We contend that such guarantees do not conflict with the conventional policies maintained by the nuclear-weapon states. In this way, therefore, North Korea will be able to exact a pledge of security assurance from the United States, with Japan able to win similar assurances from China and Russia.

The most important factor is that, within this concept, the three key nations in the region will lead the security arrangement as protagonists.

The present situation finds North Korea adamant about resuming talks with the United States on the issue of nuclear development. For that matter, I have no intention of denying either the importance or the value of such exchanges as an interim measure.

Sooner or later, though, it will prove necessary for both the governments and their citizens to realize that the two Koreas and Japan must form the bulwark of regional security in this corner of the world.

From my perspective, such a posture would go a long way toward truly consolidating the foundation forged by the Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration of last September.

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