



The Era of Northeast Asia

by Wada Haruki

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Reading the 25 February inauguration speech of South Korean president Roh Moo-Hyun, I felt my spirits lift. Heading the list of his political principles, President Roh spoke of steps towards the launch of "a Northeast Asian era":

"The Korean peninsula is located at the centre of Northeast Asia. The Korean peninsula is a bridge linking China and Japan, continent and ocean. In the past, this geopolitical location was a cause for suffering, but today it constitutes opportunity. The 21st century demands a central role for Northeast Asia.

It has long been my dream for an order of peace and prosperity of the kind that now exists in the European Union to be built in Northeast Asia. By such an accomplishment the era of Northeast Asia would be brought to fruition. I give my firm promise to devote all my effort for that day to be brought closer."

He articulated the idea that, for peace to take root systematically on the Korean peninsula, the goal should be to establish first a "community of prosperity" in Northeast Asia, and then a "community of peace." Above all, it was a statement that at the centre of the process would be the Korean peninsula, that South Korea would step forward and take the initiative. I am the one who in 1990 called for the establishment of a "Northeast Asian Common House for Humanity" (*TMhoku Ajia jinrui kyMsei no ie*) and in 1995 for a "Northeast Asian Common House" (*TMhoku Ajia kyMdM no ie*). It was my heartfelt wish that South Korea would take the initiative. Now that the president of South Korea has taken to the stage as advocate of the concept of a Northeast Asian community, I sense that history has entered a new phase.

At the 5th Meeting of the "ASEAN + 3" heads of government in Kuala Lumpur two years ago, the East Asian Vision Group presented a report entitled "Towards an East Asian Community A Region of Peace, Prosperity and Progress." The report began:

"We, the people of East Asia, aspire to create an East Asian community of peace, prosperity, and progress, based on the full development of all peoples in the region."

It was President Kim Dae Jung who proposed the establishment of this East Asian Vision Group, and former South Korean Foreign Minister Han Sung Joo who coordinated it as head of the group. The East Asian Community is also a concept that starts from economic linkages. East Asia in this case comprised the ASEAN countries plus China, South Korea and Japan. This proposal had a great impact on people. Tokyo University professor Tanaka Akihito, who participated in the discussions of this group, said, "It would be best if were to take the form of South Korea making the proposal, and Japan supporting it."

However, many people began to wonder what would happen to Northeast Asia, how China, South Korea and Japan would match the unity of Southeast Asia. At this juncture, a burst of activity from Japan was notable. Its vision was articulated in the Pyongyang declaration, which was agreed and published at the Japan-North Korea Summit on 17 September 2002. Clause Four of the declaration was as follows:

"4. Both sides confirmed the importance of establishing co-operative relationships based upon mutual trust among countries concerned in this region, and shared the recognition that it is important to have a framework in place in order for these regional countries to promote confidence-building, as the relationships among these countries are normalized."

An epochal notion of Northeast Asian regional cooperation was presented. At the Summit, Prime Minister Koizumi said, and Chairman Kim Jong Il agreed, that it was "important for a place to be found where talks could take place

between the six parties." A six-sided conference meant a conference involving North and South Korea, the US, China, Japan and Russia. The Japan-North Korea Summit and the Pyongyang Declaration was the first occasion for Japan to raise the banner of new regionalism since it turned its back on regionalism following the miserable end of the Greater East Asian idea and immersed itself in Japan-US bilateralism. And it did so by joining hands with North Korea. I felt at that moment that the concept of a "Northeast Asian Common House" had taken a big step towards realization. However, the backlash that swept over Japan after the summit produced a reaction from North Korea in the form of the nuclear problem and led to the present, difficult crisis. Nevertheless, horizons once opened will not be extinguished.

Then came the statement of the new South Korean president. South Korea took the initiative in making the proposal, and included North Korea within it. It looked like a formula that Japan could support. It might all still be at the level of dream or utopia, but the inauguration of a president who could speak of such a dream in the very midst of the present crisis showed just how vibrant South Korea is.

President Roh Moo-Hyun's design was to begin with the building of an economic community and leave till last the security community. But, as the president himself said, a systematic frame for the establishment of peace on the Korean peninsula is necessary. It is the top priority. The first step is to have North Korea abandon its plans for nuclear development. North Korea wants negotiations with the US, but it is already doubtful whether a stable framework can be reached in negotiations between the US and North Korea. Would it not be better to draw up an agreement between the six countries, under which Japan, North and South Korea pledge not to construct nuclear weapons while the US, Russia, and China pledge non-use of such weapons in this region? It is also desirable for a treaty on peace on the Korean peninsula to be drawn up between the four countries that were parties to the Korean War, and for Russia and Japan then to issue statements supporting it.

If that can be done, these two agreements and treaties could open the way toward a Northeast Asian community. In any case, under the new president serious research may be expected to begin on a realistic path toward implementation of the dream.

Translated from the Japanese original by Gavan McCormack for Japan Focus.