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The Future of Korea: An Asia-Pacific Perspective

By Mark Selden

I The Korea Problem

The essence of the "Korea Problem" lies not in the threat of North Korean development of atomic weapons, nor in the existence of a rogue regime in North Korea, as the international press and some American presidents would have it. The central problem is the division of the Korean peninsula, an outcome of half a century of Japanese colonial rule and a legacy of the incomplete character of independence resulting from US-Soviet division of Korea and the Korean War that has now continued in various forms for more than six decades. This article reflects on Korea within an Asia-Pacific and global framework. It also examines possible steps toward resolving the core conflicts, solutions that can only succeed if they find regional and global support. Korea is the most dangerous legacy of the US-Soviet division of Asia, a war without end that continues in the form of military standoff that threatens the peace of Northeast Asia.

II Two Approaches to Korea

In the midst of the intense diplomacy and strategic maneuvering in recent decades, two broadly contradictory approaches to resolving Korean conflicts have emerged at various points in time, with some actors moving between them or fine-tuning positions within them.

The first position, favored at this writing by the George W. Bush administration, with Japanese backing, emphasizes regime destabilization and collapse. It presumes that North Korea will be absorbed into a South Korea operating within the framework of American strategic preeminence in the Asia Pacific and beyond. Eschewing earlier efforts to negotiate the issue of Korean nuclear weapons development, it seeks to strangle the North Korean regime by isolating it economically, financially and politically on charges of counterfeiting and smuggling, while raising the banner of democracy for North Korea, the same banner that has brought disaster to Iraq in recent years and at this writing threatens to engulf the Middle East in a wider war.

The second position, promoted by the Roh administration, and perhaps by China, prioritizes reduction in military tensions, provision of economic aid to North Korea, and encouragement of economic reform leading eventually toward economic, social, and eventually political integration of North and South. As envisaged in the North-South Agreement of 2000 between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong-il, this would take the form of steps toward a Korean confederation leading eventually toward reunification.



Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong-il meet in Pyongyang in 2000

Both positions presume the elimination or freezing of the North Korean nuclear program. Both presume fundamental transformation of North Korean politics, economics and society, and a more harmonious regional order based on an end to the Korean War and rapprochement involving North Korea, the US, Japan, South Korea, China and Russia. But whereas the first is predicated on regime change, the second looks toward a softer, even peaceful transformation of the position of the two Koreas within a broader regional consensus. Without the agreement of the regional powers, above all the US and China, however, neither position can be effectively implemented.

Whatever one's views of North Korea, it is difficult to imagine the first scenario being achieved in the absence of major war on the Korean peninsula or beyond, a war whose destructiveness could well rival or exceed that of the earlier Korean War that involved the US, China, Russia and Japan in varying, but invariably destructive, ways. Stated differently, North Korea is not East Germany. It can be expected to fight fiercely if cornered or attacked. This reality tends to be masked or ignored by the Bush administration and by Japanese and South Korean proponents of regime change.

The second route faces immense difficulties, above all those posed by the dominance of US neoconservatives in the security sphere, but no less by North Korean intransigence that stems in part from the legacy of six decades of war and the threat of war, including nuclear attack, as well as internal political divisions within South Korea. It is important to note, however, tendencies in American policymaking that committed as recently as the Clinton administration, and could once again commit, resources and political capital to such an outcome in the interest of eliminating a North Korean nuclear option and general tension reduction. That at least is one lesson of the ultimately abortive Clinton-Kim Jong-il agreement.

There is a third alternative for the peninsula in the years to come: that is the maintenance of the status quo in Korea with its high level of regional and global tensions, one that has persisted in essentials for more than half a century. It may in fact be the preferred outcome of many regional actors including Russia, China and perhaps Japan, who might favor tension reduction but might view a reunified peninsula as a greater geopolitical threat than that posed by a divided, and therefore weakened Korea. However, in leaving unresolved the core issues that have long threatened the security of the peninsula, the situation is inherently unstable.

This article examines the possibilities for the second outcome, and discusses some of the preconditions for progress, based on the assumption that a regional or global solution are in the best interests of the Korean people and their neighbors throughout Northeast Asia, and that only such a course is sustainable in the long run.

III Historical Foundations for a Regional Solution

The China-centered East Asian regional order of the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, characterized by protracted regional peace, tribute-regulated and private trade, and domestic autonomy, was destroyed by the collapse of the Qing, Tokugawa and Chosun dynasties and the incorporation of Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia,

Indonesia and Philippines among others into colonial and semicolonial relationships. The result was protracted war across East Asia throughout the years 1840 to 1975 that left a legacy of division and conflict that was perpetuated in new forms by Soviet-US division after 1945, with the divided nations of China, Vietnam and Korea as the most compelling expression of polarization.

From 1970, however, the US-China opening paved the way for the reemergence of a regional order encompassing East Asia and the Pacific. The region's economic dynamism paved the way for region formation that crossed former divisions, most notably in the case of flourishing US-China, Japan-China, ROK-China and even cross-straits economic relations. At this writing North Korea along stands outside economically driven region formation.

We can date the end of the Cold War in East Asia at 1970, with a grand strategic realignment paving the way for new cross-border ties and the first sprouts of economic reform in China, two decades prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In recent years, economic growth and regional economic integration have been supplemented in the cultural sphere by growing interpenetration among China, Japan, Korea and beyond in such realms as tv drama, film, anime, manga/manhwa, music and other art forms. In the diplomatic sphere, we note advanced discussions concerning the expansion of ASEAN to involve China, Japan, Korea and others in a broader regional formation, albeit with few of the far-reaching legal-institutional foundations of the European Community. The nationalistic backlash to these harmonizing tendencies underlines the extent to which change is in the air. A central question is whether North Korea can come in from the cold to join this region-in-formation in ways that overcome inter-state and international conflict.

IV From the Clinton-Kim Jong-il Initiative to the Six-Party Talks and the July 4 Missile Tests

In 1994 the Clinton administration reached agreement with North Korea on a package that contained many of the elements of a solution of the second type. In exchange for freezing its nuclear weapons program, North Korea was promised light water reactors and heavy fuel to solve its energy problems. The implicit understanding, certainly on the part of North Korea, was that the agreement could pave the way for a Treaty ending the Korean War and establishing US-North Korean diplomatic relations. The failure of the Clinton administration to follow through on any of these promises led to the collapse of the deal, despite last-minute efforts to revive it in the final months of the Clinton administration.



Secretary of State Madeleine Albright meets Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang

Almost the first act of the G.W. Bush administration on assuming office in 2001 was to denounce the framework as a "sellout". Yet even the Bush administration, in fall 2005, accepted an agreement hammered out in Six-Party talks that were based on comparable principles . . . only to reject it one day later producing the present impasse. This record suggests the depths of divisions over Korea in American politics, divisions that hamstrung both the Clinton and Bush administrations. Stated differently, there exist even in the Bush administration forces that see advantages in ending the Korean War and bringing North Korea into the international order in East Asia and that recognize the risks inherent not only in the North Korean nuclear program but also in its economic weakness and international isolation.

The same divisions exist in Japanese policy. The boldest diplomatic initiative of the Koizumi Junichiro regime was his two trips to North Korea in a search for an agreement that would lead to the establishment of diplomatic relations four decades after the establishment of relations between Japan and South Korea. In the face of revelations about North Korean kidnapping of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s, however, the political pendulum in Japan swung toward antipathy toward North Korea. The result was Japan's denunciation of the July 4, 2006 North Korean missile tests, Japanese tabling of a strong Security Council resolution condemning North Korea, and even threat of a preemptive attack, the first such threat by any Japanese government in the six decades since Japan's defeat in the Pacific War. Japan thus again aligned squarely with the US, in this instance in pressing for the isolation of North Korea and regime change.

The effort by North Korea to draw attention to its desire to reopen negotiations drew on the only weapon in its arsenal: nuclear threat. The effect was indeed to call attention once again to the Korea question, and to demonstrate Korea's determination to resist attack. The principal consequences, however, were to weaken North Korea's position with its most important allies, South Korea and China, to undermine the political conditions for North-South rapprochement, and to produce mild UN Security Council sanctions. Tim Beal has pointed out in his [Pyongyang Report](#) of July, 2006.

"The Security Council's condemnation of the DPRK missiles tests was a blatant violation of the UN charter, which respects the right of all countries to self-defence. The DPRK, as a sovereign state, was quite within its rights to test missiles. The censure was also an egregious breach of natural justice. During the weeks around the DPRK tests both Russia and India test fired a ballistic missile, and the US tested two. The ROK government announced that it . . . had test fired cruise missiles, much more advanced . . . than the North's ballistic missiles, some ten times over the last three years. It appears that the Security Council which thought that 'such launches jeopardize peace, stability and security in the region and beyond' considered this applied only to the DPRK, and not other countries who conducted such tests . . . The UNSC also overlooked America's RIMPAC-2006 naval exercises (in which the ROK navy participated) although they were the largest since the Vietnam War. None of this means that the DPRK tests were wise, but they were neither illegal, nor unusual."

Blatant violation or otherwise, the consequence of the tests and the UN action have been to isolate North Korea and to undermine efforts by China and South Korea to reduce tensions. As Leon Sigal has [pointed out](#), the North's diplomacy in the wake of the tests risks further isolation. The UN Security Council resolution condemning North Korea's missile tests could have the further effect of giving both North Korea and the US further excuses not to negotiate. The question is how to reverse this and other such tendencies that lead to polarization, conflict, and ultimately to war, rather than reconciliation.

V Toward Easing of Tensions in Northeast Asia and the Resolution of the Korea Problem

The best, perhaps ultimately the only, prospect for moving forward on the diplomatic front lies with the Six-Party talks. The US proposal for Five-Party talks, in the absence of North Korea, can only result in further isolating of North Korea.



Diplomats attend the Six-Party Talks at the Diaoyutai Guest House in Beijing on September 19, 2005

The resumption of talks between North and South Korea, and particularly the reversal of recent steps to downgrade their relations in the wake of the recent North Korean tests and the tightening of the US-ROK strategic relationship, can help to create momentum toward breaking the impasse. Increasing economic ties, family visits, South Korean tourism in the North, and expansion of the free trade zone can set the stage for wider regional rapprochement. Such measures can show the benefits of reconciliation and reciprocity for all parties, and build confidence for further restorative measures.

The aggressive and erratic behavior of the North Korean regime is, of course, a barrier to normalization. Without excusing that behavior, we should not be surprised at the schizophrenia of a small state that has faced war, confrontation and nuclear intimidation by the superpower for more than half a century. This behavior poses repeated obstacles to proponents of reconciliation in South Korea. Yet the alternatives of anarchy and war in the peninsula, and the potential benefits of progress toward national reunification, require patience in the face of provocation.

South Korea and China can play critical roles in convincing Japan and the US that the costs of destabilization of North Korea are prohibitive, the results likely to be counterproductive, including the development of North Korean nuclear weapons, and the risk of war unacceptable. By improving their own relations with North Korea, the South can showcase the gains for the region overall.

Other groups with interest in regional accord, such as Korean residents in Japan and the United States as well as naturalized Koreans in Japan, could redouble efforts to encourage expanded relations with North Korea and peaceful regional outcomes. The US-based Alliance of Scholars Concerned About Korea, including a strong contingent of Koreans and Korean Americans, exemplifies one such important attempt to improve understanding of North Korea and the Korea problem in the United States. Recent books such as Gavan McCormack's *Target North Korea* (just issued in Korean), and John Feffer, ed., *The Future of US-North Korean Relations*, locate the Korean question in broad historical and strategic context and highlight the issues that must be resolved for reconciliation to take place.

A critical question is whether the ROK can play a more effective role in reducing regional tensions at the same time that it intensifies its subordinate security relationship with the United States, as in the expansion of the Pyong-taek military base, the US-ROK agreement on the transfer of the US base in Seoul to an area South of the capital, and ROK participation in the largest US military exercise since the Vietnam War in Guam in mid-June. Moreover, China's participation for the first time as an observer in the Valiant Shield exercise is a further blow to North Korea, perhaps even a factor provoking to July 4 missile tests. Strategic shifts in the region, particularly those involving the US-Japan and US-ROK military alliance surely increase North Korean sense of isolation. On the other hand, to the extent that the ROK can use its strengthened security relationship with the US to increase awareness of the regional possibilities of an accord, positive outcomes seem possible. Prior to a peace treaty ending the Korean War, a US-North Korea and North Korea-South Korea détente, it seems inescapable that South Korean governments will continue to hedge their bets between strengthening the US-ROK relationship and further opening toward the North.



A US F/A-18D from Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, refuels over the Pacific Ocean from a KC-10 Extender from McGuire AFB, NJ. (U.S. Air Force Photo/A1C Miranda M. Moorer)

The best prospects for reconciliation in Korea—the improvement of North-South relations and the Six-Party talks—have been set back by recent events including the North Korean tests, the UN resolution, and the defeats at the polls suffered by the Roh administration in South Korea. Nevertheless, in an era in which economic bonds throughout East Asia continue to deepen, these offer the brightest hope for future gains that can bring peace and an end of Korean division and war on the peninsula through demonstrating the regional possibilities of accord.

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