

Seeking a Durable Peace in Northeast Asia

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The threat of a second Korean War cannot continue. The people of Northeast Asia, particularly those living on the Korean Peninsula, have lived with this fear too long – more than half a century. For all Koreans, Japanese and Chinese, their foremost task in the 21st Century must be to forge a durable peace. Another war in the region would destroy their awesome accomplishments of the previous century.

Hopefully, 2004 will be a critical, positive turning point toward peace. The Six Party diplomatic dialogue between China, the two Koreas, Japan, Russia and the United States holds out the promise of a “peaceful diplomatic resolution” to the impasse North Korea’s nuclear ambitions has created. Other wise, the threat of a second Korean War will loom even large.

But diplomacy and agreements can succeed in building peace only where there is mutual trust. Today, none exists between North Korea, on the one hand, and the United States and Japan on the other. Nor have Seoul and Pyongyang achieved enduring reconciliation despite numerous joint agreements and intense effort.

Building mutual trust will require nothing less that the transformation of the balance of power in Northeast Asia. Accomplishing this would appear virtually impossible in light of recent history, and the impediments to be overcome. The legacies of the Korean and Cold Wars would have to be erased. These wars nurtured intense mutual distrust and animosity, political division and military rivalry between all the participants in the Six Party Talks process. Progress toward dismantling these barriers has just begun. But the Korean people still must either reunify their nation, or engage in enduring and irreversible reconciliation and peaceful co-existence. Additionally, North Korea would have to normalize its diplomat and commercial relations with the United States and Japan.

Progress is further obstructed because each of these obstacles has its own additional impediments. For example, the United States and Japan are adamant that North Korea must first disarm itself of weapons of mass destruction and resolve the emotionally charged abducted Japanese citizens’ issue before relations can improve. Historically, however, no nation has unilaterally disarmed without first being offered valuable inducements. Nor can North Korea erase the terrible consequences of its past misdeeds.

Fifty years of effort have not resolved these problems. Past failure, however, is not sufficient reason to give up. Glancing back in time will give us perspective on the present situation and future prospects.

The pursuit of peace has not been the priority in Northeast Asia since the Korean War. The region's nations concentrated on addressing more pressing concerns. They were preoccupied with political stability, training and equipping modern armies to defend against perceived threats, acquiring the knowledge and skills critical to building modern industrial societies and the reconstruction of their war torn industrial infrastructures.

Rivalry between the nuclear armed superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, further obstructed the pursuit of peace. The region's nations turned to the superpowers to obtain the resources needed to accomplish domestic political and economic priorities. Concern about defense, particularly the prevention of a second Korean War, reinforced this dependency. The two Koreas, Japan and China were drawn into the superpowers' intense rivalry. Regional collaboration and Korean reconciliation and reunification were sacrificed. Instead South Korea and Japan leaned toward Washington while China and Pyongyang looked to Moscow.

Armed deterrence forged bilateral defense treaties between the superpower and their respective allies. Deterrence prevented war, but it cannot nurture an enduring peace because it displaces diplomacy and reconciliation with armed rivalry and intensified distrust.

Despite these handicaps, Northeast Asian nations achieved impressive progress toward their domestic priorities. By the time that the Cold War had ended in 1990, Japan had emerged as one of the world's most prosperous and technologically advanced nations. South Korea had achieved impressive economic progress. Lagging behind, but rushing toward modernity was China. After some post-Korean War gains, North Korea slid backward economically after 1990.

Political achievements were similarly spectacular. Japan transformed itself into a parliamentary democracy while retaining its emperor as a symbol of political stability and cultural continuity. South Koreans, after decades of harsh authoritarian rule, lunged toward democracy. Even China, in spite of two millennia of despotic rule, continues its progress toward increasingly representative political practices. Again, only North Korea lags far behind its neighbors.

Glancing backward has enabled us to realize the awesome progress Northeast Asians have achieved. Today, it is one of the world's most dynamic and prosperous regions. Another Korean War would devastate the region's accomplishments.

These accomplishments auger well for the region's future. Having achieved their domestic priorities, the nations of Northeast Asia should preserve and perpetuate their progress by jointly concentrating on forging a durable peace. They should do so with a

sense of self confidence that puts their shared concern for peace before that of any superpower, including the United States and Japan.

The development and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and similar threats to peace and stability are indeed worrisome, but they are only symptoms of more profound problems. For Northeast Asia, the cause for continuing reliance on armed deterrence is Korea's division. Disarming North Korea alone cannot solve this problem. Nor can the removal of North Korea's leader ensure that peace will follow. We need only consider the situation in Iraq today. On the contrary, it would only increase the risk of war and political instability in Northeast Asia, particularly on the Korean Peninsula.

A durable peace requires nothing less than a transformation of the current balance of power in Northeast Asia. South Korea has been in the forefront of this process. Rather than clinging to the past, it discarded its grievances with Moscow and Beijing to normalize relations with its former adversaries. Similarly, in 2000, South Korea set aside a half century of fear, distrust and rivalry with North Korea to quicken progress toward reconciliation. Recently China and Moscow have teamed up with South Korea in a common effort to gradually, albeit peacefully transform North Korea. These efforts have yet to achieve enduring results. When combined, however, they are creating an atmosphere conducive to the reduction of tensions and the building of mutual trust.

Patient progress toward peace, as South Korea, China and Russia are pursuing, is preferable to impatient assertiveness and unilateral confrontation. The United States and Japan would do well to emulate what the other superpowers, China and Russia, are doing and jointly support South Korea's effort to achieve reconciliation with North Korea. This would quicken the pace toward reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula, thus opening the way to a durable peace. The alternatives, armed deterrence and unilateral pressure, will only perpetuate the threat of a second Korean War.