

**Forging a Durable Peace in Northeast Asia –
The United States' Role**

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Introduction

If Northeast Asia is to enjoy durable peace, the United States must play a leading role. Alone, however, it can never succeed. China was able to assert its hegemony over the region for nearly two millennia by establishing the “Chinese world order” based on China’s superior political institutions, economic and technological supremacy and a foreign policy rooted in Confucian ethics and mutual respect. Peace faltered when China proved unable to exclude the “barbarians” (nomadic tribes of Central Asia such as the Mongols) and the second ruler of a united Japan, Hideyoshi Toyotomi, challenged China by invading Korea. But China’s world order crumbled in the face of 19th Century imperialism.

Imperial Japan restored peace to the region by establishing its own world order based in Tokyo. Rather than forging peace, Japan’s quest for empire led to a half century of war, first with China (the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95) and then the Russo-Japanese War. Japan then forcefully subjugated the people of Korea between 1906 and 1920. Soon after, Japan’s army conquered northeast China (Manchuria) and subsequently invaded China proper, setting the stage for World War II in the Pacific. Unlike traditional China’s world order, Imperial Japan had built its hegemony on the force of arms and a sense of cultural and racial superiority. Consequently, imperial China’s legacy still excites respect whereas Imperial Japan is despised.

The United States filled the void left by Imperial Japan’s defeat and China’s collapse inward into political and economic chaos. The responsibility fell by default to the world’s two most powerful nations at the end of World War II: the United States and the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Their rivalry for supremacy began immediately and resulted in Northeast Asia’s division into two hostile and rival camps. Aligned with the United States was its conquered enemy Japan, the southern half of the Korean Peninsula and the remnants of the Nationalist government of China which had sought safe haven on the island of Taiwan. The USSR dominated the northern half of the Korean peninsula and aligned itself with the newly emergent People’s Republic of China.

This division of Northeast Asia into rival camps forged a new world order based on the concepts of collective security, nuclear deterrence and the forward deployment of United States military forces oppose North Korea and China. Mutual distrust and fear replaced the Chinese world order’s reliance on mutual trust and respect. Fear of nuclear holocaust and conventional “limited” war came to dominate the region’s priorities. A fragile stability was achieved after the Korean War’s devastation. But a durable peace still eludes the region.

Post-Cold War Northeast Asia

Unlike Europe much of the Cold War’s legacy has been erased, the Cold War persists in dominating Northeast Asia. The United States’ shift from a diplomatic strategy rooted in “containing communism” to engaging first China and then the Soviet Union reduced tensions and opened the door to reconciliation between the world’s four superpowers:

the United States, China, Russia (which replaced the USSR in 1990), and Japan. But Korea's continuing division into two mutually hostile nations frustrates all efforts to build a durable peace in Northeast Asia.

A new regional order must be build before Northeast Asia can benefit from a durable peace. So long as Korea remains divided and North Korea is a hostile nuclear armed nation, the region's stability will remain uncertain. The first step toward rectifying the present situation requires a candid recognition that the region's Cold War security architecture must replaced by an entirely new architecture oriented toward mutual respect, trust and the pursuit of mutual benefit.

Progress toward achieving a new security architecture was greatly assisted in the case of the United States, Russia and Europe by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the authoritarian regimes it had sustained in Eastern Europe.

Post-Cold War Northeast Asia also benefited from the Soviet Union's demise and China's recognition of the benefits to be gained from diplomatic and commercial engagement of the United States and its allies. South Korea benefited the most. By 1992 it was able to normalize relations with both its former enemies Moscow and Beijing. North Korea attempted to benefit similarly by normalizing its relations with Tokyo and Washington. After some initial progress, however, progress stalled.

North Korea has no one to blame for its continuing inability to break out of its Cold War era relations with Washington and Tokyo. The immediate cause was North Korea's decision to pursue a dual track strategy for dealing with the outside world. Pyongyang immediately after the Cold War's end was in a state of keen insecurity. It felt that Moscow and Beijing had betrayed it by engaging its nemesis South Korea.

Unfortunately for all concerned parties, including the world's four superpowers of the USA, Russia, China and Japan, North Korea opted to pursue a dual track strategy. While pursuing diplomatic engagement of South Korea, Japan and the United States, at the same time North Korea's leadership sanctioned the secret development of a nuclear deterrence capability. When discovered, Pyongyang's clandestine nuclear program destroyed its credibility in the eyes of the international community.

Options

It is this legacy that the United States, China, Russia South Korea and Japan must contend with before a new security architecture can be erected in Northeast Asia.

Options for doing so are limited to:

- Confrontation - using military might to destroy North Korea as an independent political entity,
- Coercion – diplomatic and commercial isolation of North Korea,
- Negotiation - engage in bilateral and multilateral negotiations aimed at inducing North Korea to forego its nuclear ambitions.

Option one – confrontation – is rejected by all parties. The Korean War resolved nothing despite the horrendous price it imposed on the Korean people, not to mention the tens of thousands of soldiers from members of the United Nations as well as People's Republic of China. If anything, the war crystallized Korea's division and created a legacy of hatred and mistrust that obstructs and complicates Korean reconciliation. No political leader today would advocate a second Korean War because the conflict too easily could mushroom into a global nuclear war.

Option two – coercion – thus far has only intensified North Korea's determination to build its own nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capability. The United States for half a century attempted to use economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation to compelling North Korea to bow to its will. The North Korean government and people responded with resolution rejection of Washington's demands. Japan clings to the hope that coercive measures such as sanctions might convince North Korea to change its ways. This hope is evident in Tokyo's continuing efforts to intensify both unilateral and multilateral economic sanctions on North Korea. China and Russia once again demonstrated their opposition to coercive tactics during United Nations Security Council (UNSC) discussions in early April 2009 that led to UNSC approval of a President's statement.

Option three – negotiation – obviously would appear to be the strategy most likely to achieve success. South-North Korea negotiations three times produced significant progress toward reconciliation: the 1991 South-North Basic Agreements, the June 15, 2000 South-North Joint Statement and the October 4, 2007 South-North Joint Statement. United States-North Korea negotiations yielded the Agreed Framework of 1994. Despite some weaknesses, the accord effectively halted North Korea's nuclear weapons program for a decade and put it under international monitoring. Even Japan has achieved some success negotiating with North Korea as evidenced by the September 2002 Pyongyang Declaration.

Equally evident, however, is the fact that the achievements of past negotiations proved temporary. One by one, North Korea has retracted its promises to the International Atomic Energy Agency, South Korea, the United States and Japan. The conventional wisdom places the full blame on North Korea. Our purpose here is to look beyond conventional wisdom.

A Matter of Priorities

The ultimate goal of negotiations with North Korea must be the achievement of a durable peace in Northeast Asia. Korea's unification is fundamental to achieving peace in the region. But first, the Korean Peninsula must be turned into a nuclear weapons free zone. Equally critical is the radical alter of the United States, Japan, and the two Korea's Cold War security postures and attitudes. Simply stated, each of these presents a formidable challenge.

Intense multilateral and bilateral efforts have been underway since the Cold War's end to achieve these goals. Initially the results were promising. South and North Korea accomplished much in their 1990-92 negotiations by producing the 1991 South-North Basic Agreements and the Joint South-North Denuclearization Declaration. The two Koreas were admitted into the United Nations in 1992. US-DPRK negotiations between 1992 and 1994 yielded the Agreed Framework that effectively halted North Korea's nuclear weapons program for almost a decade. A major milestone was reached in 2000 when the two Koreas convened their first ever summit. Capping this decade of progress was the 2002 Pyongyang Declaration signed between Japan and North Korea. These impressive achievements, however, have all proven to be temporary.

The Problem's Source

The risk of war on the Korean Peninsula persists. Now that North Korea has a nuclear weapons capability, another Korean War might escalate into a nuclear war. North and South Korea maintain huge military forces that they are constantly modernizing. Both sides are enhancing their ballistic missile capabilities, among other things.

But there is a very significant difference between South and North Korea. Both China and Russia have ended their Cold War military support for North Korea. No longer do they maintain a nuclear umbrella over it. Nor do they provide assurances that they will intervene on North Korea's side if one of its adversaries invades. Also, their military assistance to North Korea has ended. Now, Pyongyang must purchase with cash any weapons it seeks to acquire from Russia and China.

The United States, however, has yet to alter its Cold War defense commitments to South Korea and Japan. The US-ROK defense treaty has not been significantly revised since it was first signed more than half a century ago. The US still maintains a nuclear umbrella over South Korea and Japan, plus numerous air, sea and ground forces military bases in both nations.

The United States, Japan and South Korea contend that North Korea's formidable land army and increasingly potent ballistic missile and nuclear weapons capabilities pose the primary threat to peace in Northeast Asia. This premise is rooted in the Korean War's legacy. North Korea's effort to achieve forcefully national unification garnered it the wrath and distrust of the international community. The US forward deployment of military forces in Northeast Asia rests on the assumption that North Korea might repeat this effort.

North Korea counters that, while national unification remains an ultimate goal, it no longer seeks to unify the nation through force of arms and subversion. Instead, as reflected in its 1991-92, 2000 and 2007 agreements and summit promises, Pyongyang now insists that its priority is peaceful political reconciliation and economic collaboration. But the United States' "hostile policy," North Korea's leadership claims, obstructs progress toward reconciliation and peace.

We need not necessarily accept North Korea's claims as credible. Summarily dismissing its claims of a "hostile policy" accomplishes nothing. Instead, we need to understand North Korea's definition of "hostile policy" so that we can predict accurately North Korea's demands in future negotiations.

North Korea's Definition of "US Hostile Policy"

American negotiators first heard the words "US hostile policy" when they sat down for their first diplomatic negotiations with North Korea in New York in June 1993. Chief DPRK delegate Kang Sok-ju, first vice minister of Foreign Affairs, initiated the negotiations by reading a statement that claimed the source of the "nuclear issue" was the "US hostile policy" toward North Korea. That claim persists.

The essence of "hostile policy" is that the United States is striving to "strangle North Korea," i.e. destroy it as an independent, sovereign political entity. According to Pyongyang, the effort dates from the Korean War when the United States convinced the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to label North Korea an international outlaw and an aggressor. A strategy of "containment" was applied to North Korea that included exclusion from membership in international organizations and extensive economic sanctions. The United States' and South Korea's joint aim was to undermine the government of North Korea.

Reinforcing the diplomatic and commercial strategy of "containment" was the United States' military strategies of collective security and deterrence. The United States signed separate defense treaties with South Korea and Japan. These allowed the United States to forward deploy tens of thousands of US army, navy and air force personnel and their equipment in South Korea and Japan. In exchange, the United States guaranteed that it would counter any North Korean attack on either ally. At the same time it would maintain a "nuclear umbrella" over both allies to deter a possible nuclear attack on them by either of North Korea's two primary allies, Russia (then the Soviet Union) and China (People Republic of China).

This arrangement successfully deterred a second Korean War, but it cannot forge a durable peace in the region.

North Korea claims that the United States' maintenance of this Cold War defense arrangement, combined with President George W. Bush's December 2002 declaration of a doctrine of "pre-emptive nuclear strike" (so-called Bush doctrine) require that North Korea develop and maintain nuclear weapons to "deter" a nuclear attack by the United States.

During the decade from 1992 and 2002, North Korea concentrated on pursuing dismantlement of the "hostile policy" through negotiations, first with the United States, then with South Korea and finally in 2002 with Japan. But President Bush's December 2002 declaration of a "pre-emptive nuclear strike" doctrine followed by his January 2003 "axis of evil" speech escalated North Korea's concerns. The "axis of evil" comments

concerned Pyongyang because President Bush identified North Korea as one of three potential targets of his “pre-emptive doctrine.” This concern was further intensified when the United States invaded Iraq in April 2003 to prevent it from developing a nuclear arsenal.

One consequence of this invasion was North Korea’s decision to develop nuclear weapons in tandem with continuing negotiations. China’s hosting of the Six Party Talks sustained North Korea’s willingness to pursue a dual strategy of negotiations first with the development of nuclear weapons as a secondary goal. But before it would return to the Six Party Talks, North Korea insisted that President Bush cease its derogatory remarks about North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. His belittlement of Kim Jong Il had come to symbolize in Pyongyang the United States’ hostile policy. Only after Bush reluctantly restrained himself did the talks resume.

The Six Party Talks’ September 2005 accord aroused hopes that negotiations might achieve results, but within a matter of days, the United States imposed financial sanctions on North Korea, froze some of its financial assets in a Macao bank and blocked Pyongyang’s ability to engage in international commerce. Pyongyang’s leadership saw these measures as a manifestation of the United States’ hostile policy. At the same time, it apparently convinced some of North Korea’s most powerful political figures, i.e. generals of the Korean People’s Army (KPA) that the United States could not be trusted. Within a year, North Korea exploded its first nuclear weapon in October 2006.

Another year of intense diplomacy by China, Russia, the United States and South Korea convinced North Korea to return to the Six Party Talks. North Korea’s stance remained unaltered: it would eventually dismantle its nuclear weapons program but only if the United States dismantled its “hostile policy.”

Inflation

A fundamental characteristic of North Korea’s negotiating tactics is to increase the price of agreement the longer it takes for the other side to reach an agreement. Consequently, by 2007, North Korea had expanded its definition of “hostile policy.” During the 1990s, Pyongyang was willing to make a deal if the United States lifted some sanctions, ended the annual joint US-South Korea military exercise “Team Spirit,” and supplied 500,000 metric tons of heavy fuel oil (HFO) until construction of two light water reactors (LWR) had been completed. In exchange, North Korea “froze” its nuclear development program, remained a member of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), agreed to respect the South-North Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as well as cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and to re-engage South Korea in dialogue.

But by 2007, Pyongyang’s price for ending its nuclear weapons program had escalated to ending the “hostile policy” by:

- ending all economic sanctions on the DPRK,
- building the DPRK two light water reactors (LWR)

- supplying HFO (as promised in the September 2005 Six Party Talks Accord)
- providing other economic assistance (September 2005 Accord)
- signing of a peace treaty
- withdrawal of US military forces from South Korea
- joint verification that there were no nuclear weapons in either half of the Korean Peninsula,
- normalization of diplomatic and commercial relations,
- access to the US market for DPRK goods.

Hill's Diplomacy

Chief US negotiator to the Six Party Talks Department of State Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill made a determined and sustained effort to convince North Korea that the United States did not harbor a “hostile policy” toward North Korea. His well intended efforts ultimately fell far short of their intended goal.

The causes were many such as:

- distrust in Pyongyang toward Washington,
- vacillation in Washington over how to deal with Pyongyang,
- Japan's objections to his efforts to phase out economic sanctions, and
- Hill's faulty understanding of the concept of “hostile policy.”

Early in his efforts, Hill dismissed “hostile policy” as an illusion. But when Washington imposed financial sanctions on North Korea in October 2005, he could no longer dismiss the idea as a myth. But then Hill concentrated on phasing out economic sanctions as the best way to convince North Korea that the United States no longer harbored a “hostile policy” toward it.

This put Hill on a diplomatic tread mill which he found impossible to dismount. No sooner had he convinced President Bush to cease selected sanctions on North Korea than Pyongyang disputed Washington's narrow definition of “verification.” Hill defined this term according to “international standards,” that is a definition found in the NPT. But Pyongyang viewed verification in terms of its definition of “hostile policy.” For Pyongyang, verification meant joint US-DPRK simultaneous verification in both halves of Korea that there were no nuclear weapons. Hill knew that such a concept could never be sanctioned in Washington.

Escalation

At the beginning of 2009, North Korea appears to have again adjusted its strategy. In the 1990s, it emphasized achieving its goals by pursuing negotiations, primarily with the United States but also with South Korea and Japan, its former allies Russia and China, as well as the European Union and other nations. But between 2002 and 2008 North Korea shifted its strategy to a dual track of pursuing negotiations while simultaneously building a “nuclear deterrent capability,” which it justified by pointing to evidence of the “US hostile policy”: the “Bush Doctrine” of pre-emptive nuclear strike, Bush's “axis of evil” comments and the US invasion of Iraq.

Now, as of May 2009, North Korea appears to have put building its “nuclear deterrent capability” before achieving a negotiated settlement with the United States, South Korea and Japan. The DPRK Foreign Ministry on January 13, 2009 (“DPRK Foreign Ministry’s Spokesman Dismisses U.S. Wrong Assertion,” January 13, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp) asserted that it had “consented to the September 19 (2005) Joint Statement” of the Six Party Talks to achieve the,

denuclearize not only the northern half of the Korean Peninsula but the whole of it, and to this end, the United States committed itself to terminate its hostile relations with the DPRK, assure it of non-use of nuclear weapons and clear south Korea of nukes, etc.”

The statement makes it very clear that Pyongyang’s goal in future negotiations is “simultaneous nuclear disarmament” which it terms as “the only option.”

As for the price of “simultaneous nuclear disarmament,” the Foreign Ministry declared in another statement on January 17 (“DPRK Foreign Ministry’s Spokesman Dismisses U.S. Wrong Assertion,” January 17, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp) that the “U.S. is miscalculating if it considers the normalization of the DPRK-U.S. relations as a reward for the DPRK’s nuclear abandonment.” The statement concludes, “Though the bilateral relations are normalized in a diplomatic manner, the DPRK’s status as a nuclear weapons state will remain unchanged as long as it is exposed even to the slightest U.S. nuclear threat.” Obviously the price for ending North Korea’s nuclear ambitions has risen significantly since 1994.

Even the General Staff of the Korean People’s Army (KPA) has reiterated this stance, a most unusual development. Usually only the KPA Mission at Panmunjom (formerly the North Korean representatives to the Korean War Military Armistice Commission) issue statements. Such statements normally object to US-ROK joint military exercises and related developments. DPRK military representatives to the South-North Military Talks in recent years have issued statements regarding the talks. But the KPA’s General Staff remained silent until February 2. That day a “spokesman for the General Staff” issued a statement that began (“DPRK’s Principled Stand on Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula Reiterated,” February 2, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp) ,

It is the unshakable stand already clarified by the DPRK that it will never show its nuclear weapons unless the U.S. rolls back its hostile policy toward the DPRK and the latter is completely free from the former’s (*sic*) nuclear threat, ...”

The spokesman added, “The DPRK will never ‘dismantle its nuclear weapons’ unless nukes in south Korea are dismantled to remove the nuclear threat from the U.S.” Such statements greatly increase the price North Korea expects to extract from the United States and South Korea in exchange for dismantling its nuclear weapons arsenal.

The uncharacteristic public issuance of statements by the KPA General Staff has continued. On February 19, the General Staff’s spokesman declared that, “...the Korean People’s Army is fully ready for an all-out confrontation ...” (“KPA Ready for All-out

Confrontation, February 19, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp). Again on March 9, 2009, the KPA's Supreme Command issued a report ("KPA Supreme Command Orders All Its Service Persons to be Fully Combat Ready," March 9, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp) that stated it had ordered ,

... all the service persons to be fully combat ready and follow every move of the aggressors with vigilance in view of the grave situation prevailing in the country and deal merciless retaliatory blows at them should they intrude into the sky and land and seas of the DPRK even an inch.

The includes the perplexing statement, "War maniacs should be dealt with arms, not with words."

The immediate reason for the "report's" issuance was the commencement of joint US-ROK military exercises on March 9. In previous years, only the Foreign Ministry and the KPA's Panmunjom Mission has issued such statements.

But the most worrisome utterances had yet to come. The Foreign Ministry on March 24 issued yet another statement prior to its April 5 launching of a long range ballistic missile. The statement declared, "The six-party talks are now on the verge of collapse due to Japan's non-fulfillment of its commitment, an intention to delay the denuclearization of the peninsula in a bid to find a pretext for going nuclear." ("Spokesman for DPRK Foreign Ministry Slams Anti-DPRK Campaign over Its Projected Satellite Launch," March 24, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp). The statement then warns, "If it is impossible to put and end to the hostile relations through dialogue, then there is no other option but to bolster up the muscle to deter the hostile acts." In other words, not having been able to achieve its national goals via negotiations, North Korea has decided it will first strengthen its military capability, including nuclear "deterrent capability" so that it can negotiate from a position of strengthen.

Again the KPA's General Staff

Toward Successful Negotiations

Sustained progress toward peace in Northeast Asia will first require that the United States and its allies agree to eventually Thus far, efforts to deal with North Korea have been poorly coordinated between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul. During the 1990s, South Korea shifted from supporting negotiations with North Korea (1990-93), to opposing such an effort. Seoul under President Kim Yong-sam preferred coercive measures aimed at quickening North Korea's economic collapse. This was at odds with the Clinton Administrations engagement strategy. Japan at the time followed Washington's lead. But no sooner did South Korea under President Kim Dae-jung shift to an engagement strategy than the United States under President George W. Bush adopt a strategy of coercion. Again, Japan adjusted to its ally's shift and adopted coercion as its preferred method for dealing with North Korea. During the Bush Administration, the United States

vacillated between so-called “hard line” and “soft line” tactics. Initially these shifts confused Pyongyang and intensified its mistrust of United States’ intentions.

Once the Six Party Talks commenced in August 2003, North Korea took advantage of the differences between Seoul and Washington, Seoul and Tokyo, and even Washington and Tokyo to manipulate one ally against the other. Consequently, Pyongyang’s advocates of building a nuclear “deterrent” capability gained much more time to pursue nuclear and ballistic missile development programs. Consequently, the Six Party Talks have yet to achieve their goal of formulating a diplomatic resolution to the North Korean nuclear issue.

Several steps will be necessary:

1. US, Japan, South Korea trilateral negotiations to define new security priorities and strategy,
2. Engage China and Russia in multilateral discussions designed to formulate a mutually agreeable package of security, diplomatic and economic inducements to eventually be offered to North Korea in exchange for the end of its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

Their first step must be to concur on a new set of security priorities. In other words, even before engaging North Korea in any negotiations, the United States should engage its allies in formulating a new security strategy.

North Korea’s Dual Strategy

North Korea since 1989 has alternated between two polarities in its foreign and security policies. At times, it has seemed determined to discard its isolation and distrust of the outside world in favor of pursuing diplomatic and commercial engagement of the international community. Political talks with Tokyo in 1989 initiated a hopeful process that paralleled the intensification of dialogue with South Korea. Eventually talks with Japan stalled but considerable progress was achieved with South Korea. Washington-Pyongyang dialogue soon followed. North Korea entered the United Nations, ratified a nuclear safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency and initiated implementation of several reconciliation programs with South Korea. All of this ended abruptly with the revelation that North Korea had misled the IAEA about the amount of plutonium it had previously produced.

In 1994, Pyongyang alternated between cooperation and confrontation with Washington. After the United States initiated preparations for war with North Korea, North Korea’s aging leader Kim Il Sung agreed to return to the negotiating table. Again, Pyongyang seemed eager to end its nuclear weapons program and eventually even the development of its ballistic missile program in favor of normalizing diplomatic and commercial relations with the United States.

But once again North Korea reversed course. According to reliable United States intelligence, North Korea in 2000 initiated a clandestine nuclear program that disregarded

commitments it had made to South Korea in their 1991 Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula while also breaking promises to the United States to “freeze” all its nuclear activities. Pyongyang has repeated similar cycles of vacillation during the Six Party Talks between 2003 and 2008.

These cycles suggest that North Korea’s leadership either is unwilling or unable to resolve a continuing dispute within the North Korean government. Past conduct suggests two schools of thought have been dueling since at least 1989 over how best to promote North Korea’s national security, economic development and independence. One school seems to favor a strategy that promotes national interests through negotiations. The other school seems equally adamant in its avocation that the national interests are best served by first developing a nuclear weapons “deterrent capability.” If accurate, this could explain Pyongyang’s vacillation during the past two decades.

As of early 2009, however, Pyongyang appears to have resolved its dilemma in favor of first building a formidable nuclear and ballistic missile arsenal to ensure its national security (in Pyongyang the preferred word is “sovereignty”) prior to pursuing its national interest through negotiations and cooperation with the international community.