



Prudence for Peace: South Korea-U.S. coordination must come before talks to end Korean War

By Leif-Eric Easley and Junbeom Pyon

North and South Korea plan to hold a presidential summit in Pyongyang, and Six-Party Talks on North Korean denuclearization have yielded an initial shutdown of nuclear facilities at Yongbyon. As governments eye the long-unreachable goal of ending the Korean War, policy coordination between Washington and Seoul is critical to avoid missteps in the transformation of security on the Korean Peninsula.

Six-Party Talks face a sequencing dilemma moving forward. Pyongyang demands other countries go first and drop their "hostile policies" while those countries insist that denuclearization precede diplomatic normalization. Moving past this sequencing problem will require not only economic incentives, but also structural improvements in political relations. Thus officials and analysts envision negotiations, parallel to the Six-Party Talks, on constructing a peace regime.

North Korean officials have said the best way to resolve the nuclear issue is by signing a peace treaty. In July, the North Korean People's Army suggested the U.S. and North Korea hold military talks to discuss peace on the Peninsula. During discussions at the 2006 APEC meeting in Hanoi, Presidents George W. Bush and Roh Moo-hyun were optimistic about the prospects for a peace regime. Assistant Secretary Christopher Hill has said the U.S. is ready to begin negotiations on a permanent peace by the end of 2007. South Korean officials have said the upcoming inter-Korean summit promises steps toward a peace regime.

A peace regime for the Korean Peninsula should involve more than formal cessation of hostilities. The 1953 armistice agreement should be replaced with a permanent peace treaty signed by North and South Korea, China, and the United States, and endorsed by a UN Security Council resolution. A peace regime should also include agreements on denuclearization verification, conventional arms reduction and redeployment, trade and development assistance, normalized North Korean relations with the U.S. and Japan, and a peace and security forum established in place of the Six-Party Talks. These agreements would lay the foundation for peaceful, democratic, and gradual Korean unification by providing the conditions for military de-escalation and North Korea's integration into the international economy.

These ideas are not new. In 1973, South Korea formally called for a peaceful unification. North Korea proposed a peace treaty in 1984. The 1992 Basic Agreement between South and North Korea called for arms reductions, reconciliation, and cooperative exchanges. The 1992 Joint Declaration and the 1994 Agreed Framework promised

denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. North and South Korea, China and the U.S. joined four-party peace talks in 1997-98. The 2000 Joint Communiqué between Washington and Pyongyang called for improving bilateral relations through economic cooperation, and the first inter-Korean summit in 2000 laid out a path for peaceful integration.

None of these agreements was duly implemented, and there was no shortage of reasons: North Korea's concerns for regime survival associated with opening to the world; the North's refusal to deal with the South as a sovereign equal; Pyongyang's apparent determination to acquire nuclear weapons; Seoul's concern that a peace treaty would permanently divide the Korean Peninsula; and deeply rooted mistrust between Pyongyang and Washington.

What is different now? Internal divisions in North Korea and uncertainty about succession of the Kim regime are possible variables. Domestic economic malaise and the increasingly unified stance of the five parties against North Korea's international transgressions may be challenging Pyongyang's apparent strategy of nuclear-armed isolation. Recent references to Roh as president of the Republic of Korea suggest a change of heart on the sovereignty issue. However, given the opaqueness of North Korea's decision-making process, it is unclear whether Pyongyang's calls for a peace treaty are strategic or tactical.

In comparison, the perspectives of the U.S. and South Korea are relatively clear. Both Washington and Seoul seem amenable to a permanent peace arrangement as leverage to denuclearize and stabilize the Korean Peninsula. This task is all the more urgent since North Korea exploded a nuclear device in Oct. 2006.

Washington has apparently determined that progress is necessary to protect U.S. interests, opting for flexibility in matching "action for action" rather than maintaining the precondition that North Korea live up to its international commitments. The prime U.S. concern is arresting the North Korean nuclear program before it can mount a device atop a long-range missile or produce fissile material that might find its way into the hands of terrorists.

If talks move forward on a peace regime, Washington will not recognize North Korea as a *de facto* nuclear power. The U.S. does not want North Korea to further challenge the nonproliferation regime or encourage other countries' nuclear option, Iran in particular. Washington also wants to ensure the strength of the U.S.-Japan alliance. If the U.S. is seen as complicit in allowing North Korea to retain even one nuclear bomb, or normalizes relations without resolution of the abduction issue, U.S.-Japan relations would be badly damaged.

Meanwhile, South Korea has changed its thinking about a

permanent peace treaty as it revises its strategy for unification. Unification via conflict, or absorption in the event of a North Korean collapse, is much too costly for Seoul given current conditions in North Korea. South Korean democratization demands that its strategy respect the South Korean taxpayer.

The pragmatic first step toward unification is thus closing the development gap between North and South. Current inter-Korean economic cooperation is insufficient for this task, and South Korea wants to avoid North Korean development that comes with Chinese influence attached. As a peace regime would make full international aid, trade, and investment available to North Korea, Seoul now sees a peace treaty as a step toward unification rather than risking permanent division. Moreover, a peace treaty would boost credit ratings and attract investment to South Korea.

U.S. and South Korean leaders are also nearing the end of their terms and are looking to burnish their legacies and help their political parties win upcoming elections. The Bush administration wants a nonproliferation agreement more effective than the 1994 Agreed Framework, and the Roh administration seeks a breakthrough along the lines of the 2000 North-South summit.

Current circumstances present new opportunities and under-appreciated dangers. If pursued in a rushed, imprudent way, a peace treaty could give North Korea cover to avoid denuclearization and hold on to a couple of bombs. It could cause further rifts in the U.S.-South Korea alliance. It could revive historical competition between Japan and China for influence on the Korean Peninsula. It could tempt a future U.S. administration to abandon South Korea. It could permit North Korea to benefit from international recognition and assistance while disregarding human rights. It could undermine mechanisms that have worked for decades on the DMZ, leaving North and South Korea responsible but unprepared for maintaining peace.

To ensure that a peace agreement does not damage South Korean security and U.S. interests in the region, Seoul and Washington should coordinate and agree on the terms and conditions for a peace regime before negotiating with Pyongyang. Questions that require joint U.S.-South Korea answers include: how should a peace treaty address border and territorial disputes between the two Koreas? What post-treaty role should the U.S. and UN have in Korean security? How can Seoul ensure that North Korea respects its sovereignty and that Pyongyang has no say in decisions about U.S. forces hosted by South Korea?

The U.S. administration will need to build support in Congress for amending regulations that limit or prohibit trade and diplomatic relations with North Korea. Even more importantly, the South Korean military and bureaucracy must prepare to assume the duties of maintaining peace with North Korea as the U.S. and UN roles are reduced.

Progress on the North Korea nuclear issue has been two steps forward, two steps back for 15 years. Broadening negotiations – toward a comprehensive deal that transforms how North Korea relates to the world – could present Pyongyang with new incentives for disarmament. But there is unlikely to be time for adequate planning and successful peace talks with North Korea before South Korean and U.S. elections press the 'pause' or even the 'restart' button on negotiations with Pyongyang. It's not too early to begin planning for a peace regime, but it would be imprudent to pursue peace talks without closer coordination between South Korea and the United States.

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