Peace Building on the Korean Peninsula and the Role of Japan

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1. Introduction

In the course of this past one year, the Korean Peninsula has seen a panorama of exciting events that seemed to augur the arrival of a new era in the whole history of the peninsula marked by the tragic division since the end of the Second World War.

What triggered this process, of course, was the historic visit of the President of the Republic of Korea to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea that brought about the first summit meeting between President Kim Dae Jung and Chairman Kim Jong Il in June 2000. What has ensued from this event, particularly for those of us cooperating with the ROK as partners, has been, to quote the expression of one American observer, “an experience in a roller coaster ride, both climbing to new heights, and also experiencing a series of wild twists and turns and ups and downs.”

Whatever impression one may form about this “experience in a roller coaster ride” for one year, the conclusion seems to be inescapable that this roller coaster ride has brought about a radical change in our perspective about the future of the North-South relationship on the peninsula, although the roller coaster is at this moment riding through a fairly obscure terrain, if not through a dark tunnel. In any case, it seems too early to form a conclusion about the whole ride, which has not fully run its course.
2. The Significance of the Kim Dae Jung Initiative

It would be fair to say that the true significance of the Kim Dae Jung initiative under the “sunshine policy” towards the DPRK will have to be judged in light of its effects upon the ultimate construction of peace on the Korean Peninsula - something that we are to watch out through the process of progress in the ROK-DPRK dialogue and in the US-DPRK contacts.

Throughout the last twelve months, opinions have been oscillating between the view on the one hand that the sunshine policy has already produced a positive yield by opening up the DPRK and bringing it into contact with the outside world as a “normal state”, and the view that the DPRK has been rather skilful in drawing as much assistance as possible out of the ROK and the international community, without offering *quid pro quo*, especially in terms of the relaxation of tension on the peninsula, on the other.

The jury is still out for the final verdict to come. Nevertheless, there is one thing that no one can deny: it is that the June summit last year was an event of historic significance in and of itself, to the extent that this first meeting in history of the two leaders of the divided Korea has changed the whole outlook for the possibility of peace and stability in Northeast Asia. As a background to that historic development, naturally, one should recognize the stark reality that the DPRK has little choice but to go in the direction of “new thinking” and move towards policies of opening up and economics reform for the survival of the regime. All this is taking place in the context of a failing economy caused by mismanagement and unfavorable natural conditions, as well as a changed environment in the wake of the demise of the Cold War. In this sense, the event clearly symbolizes the beginning of the end of the Cold War on the Korean Peninsula, however tortuous and long-winded the process for getting there is going to be. We in Japan wholeheartedly support the bold
At this juncture, nevertheless, it is also undeniable that the North-South dialogue gives the impression of having stalled. Some critics point out that one decisive factor is the hardening of the U.S. position towards the DPRK as a result of the arrival of the new administration in Washington. In the recent official visit of President Kim Dae Jung to Washington, the impression was created that President Bush took a cautious position to remind President Kim Dae Jung that in response to Kim’s sunshine policy, the DPRK was offering very little in return and that the DPRK would need to substantiate its words with deeds on the basis of reciprocity.

It would seem to be an oversimplification, however, to conclude from this meeting that the new Bush administration has turned a cold shoulder to Kim Dae Jung’s approach to the DPRK. As reflected in the “Statement of the President” just released on June 6, 2001, by the White House, President Bush has now directed his national security team “to undertake serious discussions with North Korea on a broad agenda to include: (a) improved implementation of the Agreed Framework relating to North Korea’s nuclear activities; (b) verifiable constraints on North Korea’s missile programs and a ban on its missile exports; and (c) a less threatening conventional military posture.”

This apparently indicates that the new administration is not going to depart in principle from the approach established by the Agreed Framework of 1994 between the U.S. and the DPRK, nor presumably from the Perry process for its implementation, as endorsed by the three partners of the U.S., the ROK and Japan. And it is in this context that Secretary of State Colin Powell, in his meeting with Foreign Minister Han Seung Soo of the ROK on the following day,
confirmed that the United States wanted to enter into a dialogue with North Korea “in a way that was very, very supportive of President Kim Dae Jung’s very bold efforts for his opening to North Korea.”

On the other hand, it is clear that the new administration is not going to be content with the policy of “living with constructive ambiguity” but will insist on an effective system of verification, when it comes to issues like the development of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, which can shake the very foundation of the regional stability. As for the sunshine policy to prepare the ground for reconciliation between the North and the South, we all welcome this initiative, provided that it does not risk putting in jeopardy the issue of security of the region, including the security of the ROK, Japan and the United States.

3. The Problem of Peace Building on the Korean Peninsula

It is in this last context of security of the region that the issue of the framework for peace becomes an important issue, because the process of reconciliation between the South and the North that President Kim Dae Jung has embarked upon by his sunshine policy cannot be complete without the establishment of a lasting framework for peace.

Up until the early part of 1970s, the North had advocated for conclusion of peace between the North and the South, thus recognizing the ROK as a party for the peace agreement in creating a mechanism for peace. However, the North changed its position in March 1974, after the breakdown of the dialogue between the North and the South. It started to insist on the conclusion of peace between the DPRK and the U.S. This position has since been maintained up till now in principle.

This position has “in principle” been maintained except for one
instance when the North acceded to the position of the ROK for a peace accord between the North and the South. This was in December 1991, when the “North-South Basic Agreement” was adopted at the North-South High Level Talks. At this time, the DPRK agreed to the conclusion of peace between the North and the South in Article 5 of the Paris Agreement.

Nevertheless, as the process developed between senior officials of the U.S. and the DPRK to start direct contacts in the wake of the DPRK declaration of withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty of Nuclear Weapons in 1993, the DPRK apparently switched its target of negotiations to the U.S., thus reverting to the old position that it had maintained before the North-South Basic Agreement. The DPRK started to talk about the conclusion of peace between the DPRK and the U.S. under the name of a “New Peace Agreement”.

It was presumably with a view to inducing the North into the conclusion of peace between the North and the South that the new mechanism of “Four-Party Talks” was created as a forum for multipartite consultations in April 1996, following a proposal made in a U.S.-ROK summit. At present, this is the only functioning forum for multilateral consultations in existence for the conclusion of peace. Even at this forum for Four-Party Talks, however, the North has continued to insist on the conclusion of peace between the DPRK and the U.S. Presumably because of this, the Four-Party Talks have been stalled since August 1999.

Against this background, the summit meeting initiated by President Kim Dae Jung of June 2000 seems to have been a golden opportunity to bring about a breakthrough to the existing impasse on the issue of the conclusion of peace. It should be emphasized that the issue of transforming the Military Armistice Agreement, concluded in 1953 as a result of the termination of
hostilities in the Korean War, into a durable peace agreement between the North and the South is to be regarded as the cornerstone of a lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula. Admittedly the view exists that “while establishing lasting peace is crucial; the contents of a peace agreement, to replace the Armistice, are likely to be more important than the formula of who signs it.” Nevertheless, the issue of the formula for a peace agreement has its substantive importance to the extent that it determines the essential character of the peace to be established and the roles of the respective parties to this peace. Presumably, it is precisely for this reason that the DPRK has in recent years been setting its target on the U.S. as the interlocutor for the negotiations, while putting the ROK on the sideline in such negotiations.

In spite of the expectation entertained by the international community arising out of this background, the North-South Joint Statement announced at the end of the historic meeting between the two top leaders of the North and the South did not contain any reference to this issue. Given the background described above, it is difficult to assume that the North has now dropped its position of insisting on the conclusion of peace between the U.S. and the DPRK. In fact, when the First Vice-Chairman of the DPRK National Defence Commission, Marshal Cho Myong Rok, visited Washington in October 2000, this issue may well have been raised. However, the language of the U.S.–DPRK Joint Communiqué issued on that occasion suggests that there was no bridging of the gap on this issue between the U.S. position to induce the North into the resumption of the Four-Party Talks and ultimately to the conclusion of peace between the North and the South and the position of the DPRK to insist on a peace agreement between the DPRK and the U.S.

4. The position of Japan on Peace-Building on the Korean Peninsula

Japan did not participate in the Korean War nor did it sign the
Armistice agreement. To the extent that the Four Party Talks is a framework for the four parties directly involved in the conclusion of the Armistice to meet together for discussing exclusively the issue of peace in the technical sense of transforming the Armistice Agent into a peace agreement, there is no role for Japan to play within this framework on this question. In this context, Japan shares the view of the ROK and the U.S. that the Four Party Talks is the only viable framework for effectively transforming the existing arrangement under the Armistice into a new arrangement for peace that could ensure a durable peace on the Korean Peninsula.

However, going beyond this narrow technical issue of how to effect the process of transforming the Armistice into a peace agreement, Japan is deeply interested in the problem of building peace on the Korean Peninsula for a number of reasons.

First of all, Japan is yet to normalize relations with the DPRK, an entity created on the Korean Peninsula which had been detached from Japan as the result of the Second World War. In this sense, Japan’s case for the normalization of relations with the DPRK is qualitatively and essentially different from other countries’ process of establishment of relations with the DPRK. In the process of normalizing relations, Japan and the DPRK have to settle all relevant issues outstanding from the past and set a new framework for relations, taking into account the settlement achieved between Japan and the ROK at the time of the normalization of relations between them in 1965. This arrangement, at the same time, should be in line with the framework for peace to be created between the North and the South. This is the reason why the process of negotiations for the normalization of relations between Japan and the DPRK have been going on since early 1990s, in parallel with, though independently of, the process of dialogue between the ROK and the DPRK. While these two processes are not formally linked with each other in any
institutional sense, they are inevitably related to each other in a substantive sense, because of the political and economic impact of one upon the other.

The second factor is the fact that the security of Japan is directly and inseparably linked with the problem of peace on the Korean Peninsula. It is well known that the DPRK has developed and deployed intermediate range “Nodong” missiles, which place most of Japan within their range. The launching of “Taepodong” missiles across the Japanese archipelago in 1998 shook Japan, as it demonstrated the DPRK’s capability to strike Japan by overflying the territory of Japan. However, the establishment of a durable framework for peace on the Korean Peninsula, in which the military capabilities of DPRK would be properly harnessed and placed under effective verification, in conjunction with progress in the implementation of confidence building measures between the North and the South, would substantially reduce the threat of the DPRK for Japan. What is more, the contingency that the military threat to Japan from the DPRK could become real would certainly be correspondingly smaller, as the framework for peace between the North and the South on the Peninsula could be consolidated.

As the third factor, we should never lose sight of the fact that cooperation of Japan, together with the ROK and the U.S., for engaging the DPRK in the process of opening up and reform is going to be an indispensable ingredient of this process, if peace to be achieved through the establishment of a framework for peace on the Korean Peninsula is to be consolidated into a durable peace. Japan is capable of, and prepared for, assuming its own share of responsibility for the creation of such eventuality, in close partnership with the ROK and the U.S. Indeed, the potentials that Japan holds for contributing to the process of rehabilitation and development of the DPRK and eventually to the process of reunification and prosperity of the Korean Peninsula is quite considerable, once the ongoing process of negotiations for the normalization of
relations with the DPRK comes to a fruition.

Seen in the context of these factors, the relevance of Japan to the process of peace on the Korean Peninsula in this wider setting should be clear. Japan can play a critical role in promoting the peace process in cooperation with the ROK and the U.S. It is in view of this that I believe there is all the greater necessity for the three of us partners to engage in as close consultations as possible on a comprehensive strategy to cover all these different aspects of peace-building on the Korean Peninsula.

5. The Prospect for the Future and the Role of Japan

There is no doubt that the future of peace-building on the Korean Peninsula will depend largely on how DPRK is going to play its cards. First of all, in relation to the U.S. the DPRK will have to engage in serious negotiations with the new U.S. administration taking into account the new approach of the Bush administration towards the DPRK. Second, but more importantly, it will be incumbent upon the DPRK to respond in all seriousness to the reconciliation initiative taken by President Kim Dae Jong since one year ago. After all, it may well be the case that the bold step initiated by President Kim Dae-Jung may be something with a long strategic aim in view, without seeking for an immediate quid pro quo in return, just as the “Ostpolitik” launched by Chancellor Willy Brandt in 1970s was. Nevertheless, some indications of a positive response from Chairman Kim Jong II to reciprocate the show of goodwill by the President of the ROK, through the demonstration of his own sincerity to move for reconciliation would seem to be critical. Otherwise, a total absence of such a response would put the worthy process started by President Kim Dae Jung in serious jeopardy by discrediting the President, as well as the validity of his approach. This would seem to be already happening
Unfortunately, the immediate prospect for a major breakthrough towards the establishment of peace on these two accounts cannot be said to be too bright. One test for this prospect may come through a possible visit of Chairman Kim Jong Il to Seoul during the tenure of office of President Kim Dae Jung. The promised visit has been postponed for various professed reasons and circumstances. If Kim Jong Il should decide to carry out his promise to visit Seoul in the near future, for whatever reason that might be, be it domestic or diplomatic, or political or economic, that in and of itself could be a catalyst for resurrecting the momentum to the process for peace-building.

It would appear inevitable that most probably this visit, in contrast to the historic visit of President Kim Dae Jung a year ago which succeeded in creating a momentum where there was none, would not have the same galvanizing effect of resurrecting and sustaining this momentum, unless it could produce progress in the relaxation of tension towards the peace process in substance. Mere display of rhetoric would not suffice this time for sustaining the momentum for peace building. In comparison with the North-South Joint Communiqué of the summitry last year, which focused mainly on the political goal of unification, the outcome of the next summitry on the occasion of this eventual visit of Kim Jong Il would have to focus on a more immediate problem of how to draw a realistic road map to the consolidation of peace on the peninsula, pending the achievement of the ultimate goal of unification.

In the process of preparing this road map, which should involve a much broader and more comprehensive process of consultations among a wider group of interested parties than just the participants in the Four Party Talks, close cooperation in particular among the three major partners - the ROK, Japan and the US - is going to be essential. Admittedly, each has its own role to play in this process, in accordance with its own priorities and its own areas of
major concern to deal with. Nevertheless, close coordination on what each one of us does respectively within a jointly agreed framework of a common strategy is going to be crucial for the success of the process.

At the present stage, the consolidation of peace on the Korean Peninsula will have to start with the acceptance of the existing reality, i.e. the coexistence of the two regimes on the peninsula, pending the ultimate unification. On this basis, we among the three major partners should focus on what we can do together under the present circumstances, in order that the state of friendly coexistence of the ROK and the DPRK can be created on a durable basis. It is my belief that this architecture of peace can only be constructed on a durable basis through joint efforts among all the partners in this region in an enlarged forum of multilateral consultations, which would eventually include China and Russia as well.