

NEIGHBORHOOD BUILDING IN NORTHEAST ASIA AND THE KOREAN UNIFICATION

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Has the recent six-party talk in Beijing on the North Korean nuclear issue marked a turning point in the history of Northeast Asia? Not quite so. We might say, however, that the talk reflected a real possibility of change for North Korea, Northeast Asia and indeed the global security relations. In many ways, the current situation in the Korean peninsula is a product of the regional history and geopolitics of Northeast Asia, and therefore, has to be understood in the context of regional and global development.

First, in the global context, the cold war confrontation between the East and the West was over nearly ten years ago and no longer constitutes a factor influencing the course of change in the Korean peninsula. The United States and the Soviet Union had divided Korea in 1945 and subsequently sponsored the creation of two state systems which resulted in the Korean War. Yet the two great powers which exercised such a decisive power in dividing Korea has today only partial, if not marginal influence in bringing the Korean unification. Second, and more importantly, the international relations in Northeast Asia have changed drastically in the last decade. Institutional arrangements like APEC and the ASEAN plus Three attest to such change. In fact, those developments in East Asia signify more than a simple reduction of tensions in the region and show sign of regional community building.

Positive signs for regional community building in East Asia are easily detectable in the following four dimensions. First, East Asian region is showing remarkable degree of political tolerance among the different type of political systems in the region. China and Vietnam are governed under the leadership of the communist parties, while Japan and South Korea are managed by Western style democratic institutions. Yet there is no real tension emanating from these political differences, and no one is attempting to influence or intervene in the politics of someone else.

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Such a spirit of tolerance guarantees a common ground for neighbourhood building.

Second, rapidly increasing intra-regional trade volumes reflect the shared commitment to pursue the strategy of development based upon the principle of market economy. Growing enthusiasm for regional monetary mechanism, regional bond market and free trade agreements shows the strong dynamics of regionalism operating in the East Asian countries. In fact, political tolerance among the countries is partly based on the realization that it is a necessary condition for the common objective of economic growth.

Third, a new consciousness for human security and welfare is developing in East Asia on a regional scale, going beyond the national boundaries. SARS epidemic, for example, has clearly shown that many aspects of human security have to be dealt with an increased regional commitment for cooperation. In the area of cultural and social intercourse East Asia is rapidly developing a regional identity and neighbourhood consciousness through free exchange and travel.

Fourth, there is a wide-spread resolve among the people of Northeast Asia to prevent any and all military conflict in the region as a necessary pre-condition for common prosperity. They are particularly sensitive to the possibility of nuclear arms race in the region, and the fear that the North Korean nuclear project could ignite such a race. After all, Japan is the only country in the world which experienced the devastating consequence of nuclear bomb, and her immediate neighbours understand the horror of nuclear war more clearly than the people in the other regions of the world. The 1992 North-South Joint Declaration to keep the Korean peninsula nuclear free had directly reflected such a common aspiration in Northeast Asia.

While the world and the East Asian region changed rapidly and significantly during the last decade, North Korea has failed to move along and found itself utterly isolated globally and regionally. Whether such isolation is a self-inflicted wound or a damage inflicted upon her by outside forces could be a debatable question. The fact remains, however, that North Korea has become an orphan of history. To make the matter worse in the recent month, the North Korean isolation became even more acute due to a series of global events beyond her control. Among the so-called "Axis of Evils" Iraq's status was changed drastically by the military invasion and Iran by the diplomatic offensive. Furthermore, Libya has voluntarily taken a step to get out of international sanction. Consequently, North Korea became the sole target of international

pressure against nuclear proliferation. Under these unpromising circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that the North Korean leadership would seek a way out of isolation which will guarantee at a minimum the survival of regime and the subsistence for population.

Pressure and persuasion coming from three outside sources seem to have jointly and cumulatively influenced North Korea to contemplate a revision in its strategy for survival. First, the hardline American policy with its demonstration of military strength surely left a strong impression on the North Korean leadership. Second, the unanimity of public opinion in the international community against her nuclear project has perhaps surprise the Pyongyang regime. The intensity of public opinion in Japan might be understandable. But the reaction from China and Russia as well as a firm position taken by the member countries of UE and ASEAN left no doubt about the universality of negative stance against the North Korean nuclear ambition. Obviously, no relief could come from the United Nations either. Third and most importantly, painstaking efforts by South Korea to persuade the North to be realistic for its own sake as well as for the interest of entire Korean people might have some impacts.

The Beijing six-party talks is more than a multilateral negotiation to overcome the crisis emanating from the North Korean nuclear project. It is a historic attempt to develop an insurance package for the survival of North Korea and escape from total isolation in the global and regional neighbourhood. Whether North Korea has a capacity to buy such an insurance policy remains to be seen. But the experience deserves full support of all the concerned parties, for the success or failure of the effort could determine the course of history going beyond the nuclear issue.

At the six-party talks, four non-Korean parties are primarily concerned with the immediate issue of the North Korean nuclear project and its relation to the regional and global security picture. For the Koreans, however, the six-party talks does constitute a major chapter in the long struggle to achieve a national unification. Korea formally lost its independence in 1910 and, then, suffered forced division in 1945. Next year, 2005, will mark the 60th year of the national division, and six years from now, the year 2010 will mark the one hundred years of National ignominy for the Korean people to live without a unified independent statehood. It is quite natural for the Koreans to try to capitalize the opportunities provided by the global and regional change, and to make a decisive forward move towards a national unification. One might call it "Project 2010". From such perspective, the six-party talks has a potential to become a framework not only for the positive changes in North Korea

but also for the eventual unification of Korean nation. The four non-Korean participants –China, Japan, Russia and the United States- have played vital roles one way or another in the sad history of Korean people during the last century, and they could work together with the two Korean states to produce a happy end to this remarkable drama in human history.

There isn't much time left for utilizing this narrow window of opportunity, and North Korea should not fall back to the old habit of hesitation or indecision as well as clinging to self-generated illusions. Specifically, North Korea should not count on certain outcome of the American presidential election as a booster for its cause. Furthermore, political confusion in the democratic political process of South Korea, and reduction as well as relocation of the United States forces there should not be taken as conditions favouring a unification under Northern leadership. Such illusion, miscalculations and hesitations could result in an irreversible crisis from which North Korea will most likely come out as the biggest loser. Time is ripe for both North and South Korea to move forward to creation of a unified commonwealth which will operate in harmony with the development of a peaceful neighbourhood in Northeast Asia.

If the six-party talk made a tangible progress towards resolution of the North Korean nuclear power issue, it will provide a fertile ground for emergence of a new balance of power in Northeast Asia which will ensure peace and prosperity for the region. Nowadays, balance of power is often considered an outdated or irregular concept. But Northeast Asia has a classic geopolitical setting with four major powers involved, and prevention of dysfunctional imbalance is still a very relevant requirement for peace in the region.

During the course of last one hundred years, the four powers had been involved in a series of wars and adversaries, and the six-party framework could become a regional mechanism for peace in the twenty first century. In the course of such development, Korea's size and location could make her an ideal balancer of power and promoter of peace in Northeast Asia.

Until 1945, the United States was an outside power in Northeast Asia. Since then, however, she became a fully engaged inside power and the fact weilds a decisive influence for the outcome of the six-party talk and resolution of the Korean question. The role of the United States in Korea and Northeast Asia has acquired a new dimension with her accession to sole superpower status in the post cold war era. In the recent years, United States has been struggling to find a balance between the

need for unilateral action and the requirement for multilateral cooperation. If the six-party framework gains a credible ground for regional peace and cooperation, the United States could play a creative role without undue sensitivity. It will be a welcome relief for the United States, which have gone through so many difficulties in the Middle East, to perform its unique role in the setting where political and religious tolerance is practiced and a free marked functions with common rules and procedures.

All these might sound excessively optimistic. But a commonly shared vision for the future by all the neighbours is perhaps the greatest pressure on North Korea to rejoin history. The time ripens good for the six parties together to break a new ground for Korean commonwealth and northeast Asian neighbourhood.