



NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

STRATEGIC FORUM

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

Number 29, May 1995

Koreapolitik

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A Peace System in the Korean Peninsula

Security agreements between North and South Korea have had a disconcerting tendency to break down within a short time, and the confidence-building that should result from implementation of these agreements has never been achieved. The Basic Agreement between North and South Korea, which took effect in 1992, provided a partial blueprint for achieving broad restructuring of security relations and a more stable order in Northeast Asia. The ROK Government has repeatedly declared its readiness to resume discussions with North Korea to advance the unfinished agenda defined in the Basic Agreement and the Denuclearization Agreement, each of which provides much that could contribute to a peace system in the Korean peninsula. One obstacle to progress has been North Korea's insistence that a peace treaty to replace the 1953 armistice agreement should be negotiated between North Korea and the United States. The South Korean and U.S. governments have insisted that a peace treaty should be negotiated between North and South Korea.

A peace system based on agreements codifying certain security arrangements would be the most feasible next step toward lasting peace in the Korean peninsula. Peace and stability could be promoted through a series of interrelated measures that would be the functional equivalent of a peace treaty. Both North and South Koreans have spoken of a "peace system" and both sides share some similar ideas about the contents of such a system. The United States also would be very much engaged in one aspect the regulation of arms and armed forces in the Korean peninsula. Furthermore, a commission similar to the South-North Joint Military Commission established in the Basic Agreement would be authorized to deal with compliance questions. This would require examination of the continued relevance of the Military

Armistice Commission and the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission, as well as other arrangements established by the 1953 armistice agreement.

Clearly, North Korea hopes to liquidate key elements of the armistice agreement and, hence, the agreement itself. Refusing to acquiesce to the liquidation of the 1953 agreement is the only principled position open to the ROK and the United States. But this position would not be inconsistent with a South Korean effort to test North Korea's sincerity by proposing to define together a more peaceful and stable security situation.

The Conventional Force Balance on the Korean Peninsula

Numbers alone do not tell the whole story about the military balance in the Korean peninsula. Capabilities are based on quality as well as quantity. Qualitatively, South Korean equipment is superior to that of the North. That said, statistics and geography give North Korea a marked advantage in ground forces.¹ The North maintains almost twice as many troops on active duty as does the South. Its armored forces include nearly twice as many main battle tanks (3700 to 1900) plus 500 light tanks. It has 2500 armored personnel carriers to the South's 2000. While the South is ahead in towed artillery (3,500 to 2,300), the North has a 4,500 to 900 advantage in self-propelled artillery. The DPRK has deployed a considerable part of its army perhaps as much as 2/3 just north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), posing a major threat to Seoul, only 35 miles to the south. This is the most destabilizing factor in the military equation.

The North is superior to the South in air force manpower with 82,000 personnel opposed to the South's 53,000. The North also has more aircraft, 770 to 447, but qualitative superiority belongs to the ROK with its 48 modern F-16s plus F-4s and F-5s. The DPRK has 14 Russian MIG-29s but the majority of its forces are older MIG-17s, 19s, 21s, and 23s. Better trained air crews also give the ROK air force a marked qualitative edge.

South Korea's navy is larger than the North's in manpower terms, 60,000 to 46,000. The South has a larger surface force than the North (8 destroyers and 32 frigates to the North's 3 frigates), while North Korea has a 25 to 2 advantage in submarines. Both also have acquired mini-submarines. The North has a larger inventory of patrol and coastal combatants, 390 to the South's 122.

The United States has about 37,000 armed forces personnel stationed in Korea. The U.S. Army deploys one army headquarters and one infantry division. The U.S. Air Force deploys one air force headquarters and two air wings with 84 combat aircraft, of which 72 are F-16s. The Air Force also has 96 combat aircraft in Japan while the U.S. Navy has homeported several ships there, including an aircraft carrier. With or without United States help, the ROK would defeat a North Korean attack, according to most analysts, but damage to Seoul, home to a quarter of the South Korean people, would be substantial in any major conflict. General Luck, U.S. commander in Korea, has estimated that a major war in Korea could cost over a million lives and a trillion dollars. While limited conflict scenarios are conceivable, even a limited attack risks retaliation that would likely escalate the conflict to all-out war. In the end, the ROK

almost certainly would prevail in a war of escalation, as in a sudden massive attack.

Negotiated Measures to Avoid Miscalculation

Wars sometimes occur because a government miscalculates its chances for victory. This happened in 1950, prompting the beginning of the Korean War. Miscalculations of an adversary's intentions and capabilities still are possible, especially if the assessments are driven by fear and distrust, made under pressure of time, and flawed by ignorance or faulty assumptions. Arguably, some advantages can be gained through secrecy, but secrecy usually promotes military overcompensation, further contributing to suspicions and fears. Transparency, in contrast, typically has not invited an attack but has encouraged a more realistic appreciation of a threat and a more carefully calibrated response.

For these reasons, a limited degree of openness about military dispositions in North and South Korea could help to prevent miscalculation and promote stability.² The principles involved are quite simple and straightforward. The Basic Agreement has identified several potential areas for South-North cooperation. The complicated part is to define precisely what information is to be exchanged and how exactly the sides go about confirming the validity of the information.

Negotiated Measures to Enhance Warning Time

An important subset of the problems generated by miscalculation is the perception that an attack with little or no warning would produce decisive advantages for the attacker. Greater openness about military capabilities should indicate that a surprise attack ultimately would fail to change the outcome of a war on the Korean peninsula. This, in itself, should help prevent a miscalculation. But other measures, particularly constraints on deployments near the DMZ, also could help. Thinning out North Korean forces near the DMZ would help stabilize the military situation. Other ideas might be based on the principles of "nonoffensive defense," a concept in which both sides relinquish the capability to conduct deep-penetration attacks into the opponent's territory.

Other measures that would complicate the planning of a surprise attack would include assigning liaison officers to the headquarters of field commands, requiring observers at all military exercises, and limiting the size of exercises. The Open Skies Treaty, which defines methods for monitoring military activities, might be applicable as well.

Negotiated Measures to Enhance Crisis Management Capabilities

Aside from miscalculations and expectations about the value of surprise attack, conflict on the Korean peninsula could result from a failure to effectively manage an emerging crisis. Some steps already have been agreed between North and South Korea that would be useful in such situations. These include a direct communications line between ministers of national defense and a Joint Military Commission; however, there has been an unfortunate tendency in Pyongyang to view these assets as hostages to good relations.

An agreement between the North and South on the prevention of dangerous military activity, similar to the 1990 U.S.-USSR agreement could be an effective crisis management tool. Special monitoring missions could also be dispatched to prevent misunderstandings from escalating to crises.

Characteristics of a Stable Balance of Military Forces

Even without overall reductions in levels of manpower or equipment, reductions in North Korean troops and equipment deployed near the DMZ could produce greater stability. In addition, reductions in North and South Korean manpower, reductions in the levels and types of equipment, and changes in deployment patterns could yield a more stable peninsula. Such changes could be effected reciprocally a step at a time or could be negotiated as part of a comprehensive, phased package. The ultimate objective would be to reach parity in equipment levels, but there would be an obligation to reduce first those deployments most threatening to the other side. This basic notion could be developed further utilizing the principle of "nonoffensive defense" discussed above.

Application of ROK-DPRK Arms Control Agreements to U.S. Forces

If the North and South can agree on reductions of equipment and manpower levels, it is very likely that U.S. forces and equipment also would be subject to reductions. Certain principles may already have been established regarding the application of North-South agreements to U.S. forces. For example, in connection with the North-South denuclearization agreement it was agreed that in a reciprocal arrangement North Koreans could visit U.S. military facilities. United States-South Korean exercises such as TEAM SPIRIT already have played a part in North-South agreements. In addition, the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework states that "the United States will provide formal assurances to the DPRK against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the United States."

United States decisions about supplying equipment to ROK forces or to its own forces could be affected by provisions concerning treaty-limited items. An agreement on preventing dangerous military activities might affect U.S. air and naval forces operating in the vicinity of the Korean peninsula.

The United States likely will find itself acting as guarantor for some aspects of a North-South arms control agreement. The ROK, and perhaps the DPRK, might wish the United States to provide verification assistance. Noncircumvention of agreements through third-party actions has frequently been a concern in security negotiations and it is likely to be in the Korean context as well.

Assessment of the Chances of Success

Would North Korea have any serious interest in such arrangements? Possibly not, even though Pyongyang has itself proposed confidence-building measures and reductions to parity. North Korea probably believes that it holds important military advantages in its concentration of forces near the DMZ and in the secrecy with which it conducts its military affairs. But opportunities may now exist that were

not present when North Korea's economic outlook was rather brighter and it had powerful support from the Soviet Union and China. North Korea may be interested in arrangements short of a peace treaty to replace the 1953 armistice agreement, it may want to reduce the heavy economic burden of its huge military establishment, and it clearly needs to open up economic and political relations with economically advanced nations. A more stable military situation could help prevent incidents from escalating out of control and relax tensions at the DMZ. North Korea should see this as a positive factor, particularly given the recent helicopter incident. Finally, it should be a matter of considerable interest to Pyongyang if it found that in the course of putting some arms control arrangements in place, it could obtain assurances from the United States and China that its equities in a peace system would be a matter of direct concern to these two great powers.

Perhaps these considerations, even as part of a comprehensive package of political and economic measures, would prove insufficient to overcome distrust in Pyongyang. But they could be one component in a coordinated ROK-U.S. campaign of quiet diplomacy designed to probe Pyongyang's willingness to join with Seoul and Washington in reducing tensions in the Korean peninsula.