

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF KOREA  
COMMON PROBLEM - UNCOMMON SOLUTION

A Personal Assessment  
Presented at Beijing University  
December 8, 1998  
by

Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones  
The Asia Foundation Representative to Korea

The views expressed here are solely those of the author,  
and do not in any way represent those of any institution.

We, China and the United States, have a common problem - the preservation of a peaceful, nuclear free Korean peninsula. But this problem, of course, is shared with not just North and South Korea, but also Russia and Japan. The Korean peninsula, in short, is the only place on the earth where the world's superpowers' interest co-exist in delicate, unsteady equilibrium.

Severely complicating this situation is Korea's division into mutually hostile states, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Along the narrow two mile wide and one hundred mile long demilitarized zone separating these two nations wait more than one and a half million heavily armed soldiers. The distance from Seoul to this harsh reality is no further than the trip from downtown Washington to Dulles International Airport in Northern Virginia.

Haunting this highly volatile situation is North Korea's development of increasingly sophisticated ballistic missiles, its possible possession of chemical weapons and the lingering possibility that Pyongyang will resume its efforts to build a nuclear capability. South Korea has responded by crafting its own ballistic missiles, but was determined from developing a nuclear capability in 1977 by the efforts of President Carter. Nevertheless, the US nuclear umbrella still extends over the Korean peninsula.

On the South Korea side, the United States has assembled an impressive military force of over 100,000 soldiers, sailors and airmen based in the Republic of Korea and Japan who man the world's most modern and potentially lethal bombers, fighters, submarines and surface ships. They work closely with tens of thousands of South Korean and Japanese colleagues to form a formidable force designed to deter war on the Korean peninsula with the sheer magnitude of their lethal potential.

Japan, responding to North Korea's launching last September of a long range ballistic missile through Japan's air space, has decided to add to its already technologically sophisticated defense forces a theater missile defense system or TMD which it will jointly develop with the United States. Additionally, Japan has announced plans to position intelligence collecting satellites over the Korean peninsula.

China is voicing increasing concern about the situation in Northeast Asia.

Clearly, the situation presents us more than a diplomatic problem. The situation is

potentially very dangerous and could quickly escalate into war not only in Northeast Asia but involve nations far beyond the Korean peninsula.

How can our respective governments deal with this situation? Realistically speaking, we have only three primary options to deal with the situation: war, containment or engagement.

## **War**

Memories of the Korean War linger fresh in many of our minds. Unfortunately, however, in America this war is often called the "Forgotten War". For our children, the Korean War was forgotten because the war in Vietnam captured world attention for more than twenty years. We need to remember the Korean War. Millions of Korean lives, and tens of thousands of Chinese and American lives were sacrificed, and the Korean peninsula was devastated from one end to another. Tragically, the war resolved none of the Korean peninsula's problems. Instead, it only further complicated the situation by intensifying each sides' mutual hostility and mistrust. We need to remember this war and the terrible suffering it caused. Otherwise, too easily and quickly we could repeat the mistakes of the past.

## **Containment**

The United States government originally initiated the policy of "containment" in Greece in 1948 to halt the spread of communism in Europe, but then applied it to North Korea in 1950 after the beginning of the Korean War. South Korea, Japan and most of the allies of the United States adopted and supported the policy until the Cold War ended in 1991.

The essential features of containment are the maintenance of diplomatic and economic isolation from the international community reinforced by the positioning of a powerful military force designed to deter armed assertion by one's potential enemy, i.e. the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The same policy was applied to Pyongyang's allies, the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union.

Containment and deterrence may have stabilized the situation after the Korean War, but it, like the war itself, intensified the problems. Excluded from the United Nations and its many supplementary organizations, the DPRK could not benefit from membership. Consequently, Pyongyang came to rely on a foreign policy of

coercion, and occasionally terrorism, rather than negotiation to assert its national interests. North Korea developed an economy designed to support a huge military establishment rather than an international trade oriented economy.

Like the Korean War, the policy of containment could only intensify and not solve the problems of the Korean peninsula. Containment perpetuated hostility and rivalry between North and South Korea, and between their respective allies, China and the Soviet Union backing Pyongyang and the United States and Japan backing Seoul.

Beginning in 1972, the United States began to shift its foreign policy in East Asia from containment to engagement. The process began with Henry Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing, negotiations between the US and North Vietnam to end the Vietnam war and the phased withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam. Over the next two decades, 1972 to 1991, the United States withdrew its military forces from all of Southeast Asia and normalized relations with China, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

Sadly, the situation in northeast Asia remained unchanged until North and South Korea took matters into their own hands. Their resumption of direct political talks opened the way for the end of containment in Northeast Asia. The superpowers, following Pyongyang's and Seoul's lead, contributed to the process. Moscow and Seoul, then Beijing and Seoul normalized diplomatic relations. A major breakthrough came when both Koreas were admitted to the United Nations, ending North Korea's long isolation from the international community.

The United States was slow to adjust to the situation. It clung to the policy of containment even as the two Koreas and the other superpowers worked to end the policy. Finally, in September 1991, the United States took a major step away from containment as implemented around the world when President Bush announced the withdrawal of all US tactical nuclear weapons from around the world.

South Korea quickly called on North Korea to declare the Korean peninsula nuclear free. Pyongyang reacted immediately by teaming up with South Korea to sign the Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Shortly afterward, the two sides signed the so-called Basic Agreements on non-aggression, economic cooperation and social/cultural exchange. Several joint commissions were established to work out the details of implementation.

The two Koreas, not the United States, ended the policy of containment on the Korean peninsula. But again, the United States, following the two Koreas lead,

reluctantly decided in the spring of 1993 to engage North Korea in negotiations concerning Pyongyang's decision to withdraw from the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The US do so under pressure from South Korea and other key allies, not to mention China and Russia.

Ultimately, the result was the Clinton Administration's hesitant decision to phase out its policy of containment regarding North Korea and to replace it with a policy of engagement. This policy shift was symbolized by the signing of the Agreed Framework between the US and the DPRK.

The move was welcomed everywhere except in Seoul and Washington. The champions of containment in both capitals labeled engagement a policy of appeasement and argued that giving North Korea nuclear reactors and heavy fuel oil as called for in the Agreed Framework would strengthen North Korea's ability to make war and not resolve the problems of the Korean peninsula.

### **The Pursuit of Collapse**

While Washington struggled with itself to decide which way to go, back to containment or toward engagement, Seoul lost patience under the Kim Young Sam Administration and opted to pursue a policy of bringing about the collapse of the North Korean government. This effort achieved nothing more than concern in Beijing and Moscow, friction between Washington and Tokyo on the one hand and Seoul on the other. Seoul's policy of undermining the DPRK strengthened the influence of those in Pyongyang who advocated the perpetuation of the DPRK's traditional policies of isolation, armed hostility toward the South and the US, and reliance on military power rather international trade than thoroughly.

The policy of collapse, like that of containment, only perpetuated the problems of the Korean peninsula. Actually, under the Kim Young Sam administration, the situation became very dangerous. Kim's policies, not Pyongyang, drove a wedge between Seoul and Washington. Kim's policies also greatly hindered Washington's ability to fulfill its commitments under the Agreed Framework. The Clinton Administration's critics in Washington, Republicans and those in the US government uncomfortable with the shift to engagement, confused supporting Kim's policies with backing South Korea against the aggressive, communist North Korea. All the haggling in Washington and between Washington and Seoul during the Kim Young Sam Administration was viewed in Pyongyang with great concern. Gradually, because of Washington's inability to act decisively to fulfill its

commitments, the credibility of the US commitment to the Agreed Framework was eroded in the eyes of North Korea's leadership.

## **BEYOND CONTAINMENT - ENGAGEMENT**

Today, the Agreed Framework, many argue, is on the verge of collapse. Is the policy of engagement and North Korea's dishonesty the true causes of this situation? I would argue that the situation is far more complex. All sides must share blame for the present, increasingly volatile situation.

Surely North Korea must assume a significant amount of the blame. Its reluctance to allow access to its suspect construction site, demand for an unrealistically huge sum of money as compensation for such a visit, intensifying campaign of belittling Japan and launching of a long range ballistic missile over Japan have rekindled deeply and widely held doubts about North Korea's true intentions. Such conduct is particularly odious given the international community's continuing contribution of large amounts of food and medical aid to North Korea.

The United States must also accept blame. The Clinton Administration's preoccupation with domestic politics and the erosion of the President's moral credibility intensified political party rivalry in Congress. The Republican dominated Congress sought out other issues to further discredit the President and focused on its policy of engagement toward Pyongyang. The end result has been a diminishing of the Administration's ability to win authorization of funds needed to fulfill its commitments under the Agreed Framework.

Faced with such problems at home, the Administration pressed its allies, especially in the European Union, to contribute more to support the construction of light water reactors in North Korea as called for under the Agreed Framework. Understandably, they resented this since the US itself could increase its own contribution despite the fact that it had negotiated the Agreed Framework. Again, the cumulative consequence has been an erosion of international support for the Agreed Framework.

Japan's over reaction to North Korea's launching of a missile over northern Japan in early September further weakened the Agreed Framework's credibility. Until then, Japan had strongly and consistently supported the agreement. But then Japan announced that it would withhold its one billion dollar contribution to the cost of constructing reactors in North Korea as specified in the Agreed Framework.

South Korea, fortunately, seems to be maintaining its composure despite the intensifying whirlwind of mistrust that is enveloping the Agreed Framework.