

**The Korean Peninsula and  
East Asia's Future**

by

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## Introduction

The future prosperity and economic development of Northeast Asia – the two Koreas, China, Mongolia, Russia, and Japan – hinges on the ability of South and North Korea to avoid armed hostility on the Korean Peninsula. Two armed clashes between the two Koreas in 2010 rocked the region and stunned the world – the March sinking of the South Korean naval vessel the *Cheonan* and North Korea's artillery bombardment of the small South Korean occupied island Yeonbyung in November 2010. Although the two Koreas retrained themselves and full scale warfare did not erupt, the incidents rattled the region's stock markets and raised doubts in some investors minds about the wisdom of investing in South Korea. While this damage proved relatively short lived, there was longer term collateral damage, particularly to prospects for the resumption of dialogue between the two Koreas, South Korea's relationship with China and North Korea's relationship with the United States.

How to deal with the continuing saga of a divided Korea remains a perplexing problem for all the concerned governments, not to mention the people most directly involved. Actually for (the Republic of Korea, hereafter the ROK) and its allies there are only two acceptable options, if we exclude the use of armed force to deal with North Korea. These remaining options are either containment or engagement of North Korea, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter the DPRK).

## Containment

The concept of containment was developed during the Korean War (1950-53) by the United States as it grappled with how to halt the spread of the USSR's (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) influence under the banner of the communist ideology. The USSR between 1945 and 1950 had expanded westward into Europe. Its ideological cousin the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 defeated its rival, US-backed Republic of China and the PRC declared itself the sole ruler of all of China. Then in 1950 the DPRK attacked the ROK.

The US Democratic administration under President Harry Truman immediately responded by forging an assertive foreign policy backed by resolute and superior military force to halt the USSR's further expansion, to blunt any PRC effort to occupy the ROC controlled island of Taiwan, and to deter any further armed attacks by the DPRK on the ROK. This new strategy was labeled "containment," that is preventing the USSR, PRC and DPRK from further expanding their sphere of diplomatic, commercial and military influence.

Containment was the center piece of the US and its allies' strategy from dealing with its adversaries during the Cold War. Its key elements are:

- Diplomatic and commercial isolation of one's adversaries by denying the normalization of diplomatic relations, exclusion from international organizations and enforcement of economic sanctions, and
- Deterrence – sustaining military superiority at a level sufficient to convince one's foes that an armed attack would promptly result in devastation and defeat. This requires the

US forward deployment of its military forces abroad, and collective security, that is the linking of one's allies in a network of military alliances.

- Containment's goal is to either weaken or bring about the collapse of an adversarial regime, that is a so-called "hard landing."

Once the Cold War had ended in 1990 with the collapse of the USSR, socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and Germany's unification, the United States declared victory in the Cold War. But the Cold War had not ended in Northeast Asia. By 1990, Vietnam had been reunified, Mongolia and Taiwan democratized and the PRC had shifted toward developing a market economy. But regional security remained uncertain because of continuing rivalry between the PRC and ROC as well as between the ROK and DPRK. Nevertheless, the United States and Japan, along with a hesitant and uncertain ROK, decided to shift their approach to the DPRK from containment to cautious engagement.

## **Engagement**

Most nations of the world prefer "engagement" as the basis of their foreign policy. Its key elements are:

- Maintain normal diplomatic and commercial relations, and resolve differences through diplomatic dialogue and diplomacy,
- Encourage participation in all international organization and respect for international law,
- Preserve one's armed forces but view the use of one's military only as a last resort with the main purpose of self-defense.
- Engagement's goal is to induce an adversary's gradual transformation from a hostile, highly armed authoritarian regime to one that respects international norms of conduct, accents diplomatic dialogue over armed assertiveness and respects the basic human rights of its citizens.

In the 1970's the United States, ROK and Japan agreed to pursue engagement of the PRC, and later with the USSR. These efforts yielded significant benefits for all the involved parties. Today Russia has replaced the USSR. Although not yet a mature democratic society, Russia continues its progress toward democratization while its economy is indeed increasingly market oriented. An authoritarian single party continues to monopolize political power in the PRC, but the society has developed a market economy, it is integrated into the international community both diplomatically and commercially and its society is increasingly open to external influence.

Similarly in 1993, the US, ROK and Japan agreed to pursue a modified form of engagement toward the DPRK. They promised Pyongyang some of the benefits of engagement if the DPRK met certain standards of conduct, including respect for international law and the phased end of its nuclear weapons program. The impact on the DPRK has been much more mixed than the cases of Russia and the PRC.

## **The Continuing Cold War in Northeast Asia**

Obviously the Cold War continues on the Korean Peninsula. The two Koreas are still hostile rivals. The United States and Japan, at the urging of the ROK, have reverted greater reliance on containment when dealing with the DPRK.

Here we need to answer two questions:

1. Is containment promoting our long term priorities in Northeast Asia?
2. What is our goal regarding the DPRK: Regime change or South-North Korea reconciliation?