

The US-South Korea Alliance and the Prospect of a Peace Treaty

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I welcome this symposium's call for replacing the armistice agreement with a peace treaty. Such a development would substantially reduce tensions in Northeast Asia and create an environment conducive to improving inter-Korean relations. By any human evaluation, the time for a peace treaty is long overdue.

The United States not only has the central role to play in the peace treaty process, it also presents the greatest challenge to its achievement. Although a peace treaty would serve the interests of the peoples of Northeast Asia, it has little or no intrinsic value for U.S. leaders. From their standpoint, a peace treaty has value only as a carrot to be dangled before North Korea in order to encourage denuclearization. Indeed, from the standpoint of U.S. geopolitical interests, there are certain advantages in maintaining a state of tension on the Korean Peninsula, as long as events can be controlled.

No progress can be made toward a peace treaty unless negotiations take place, and U.S. and South Korean leaders present a consistent message, saying that talks cannot take place unless North Korea first begins to denuclearize. In essence, this is a way of ruling out dialogue altogether. It is difficult to see what North Korea would have to gain from talks in which it must first meet American end objectives before discussion could even proceed on what, if anything, the United States might be willing to offer in return.

The United States and South Korea demand the unilateral implementation by North Korea of its obligations under the Joint Agreement of September 2005 as the precondition for talks. Meanwhile, the U.S. has not executed its obligations under the agreement, the most important of which is the promise to take steps to normalize relations.

Indeed, the United States undermined the agreement within days of its signing. The U.S. Treasury Department instructed American banks to sever relations with Banco Delta Asia, an institution in which North Korea held accounts that it used in foreign commerce. The Treasury Department sent letters to banks across the world, warning them not to conduct business with the bank, an action which resulted in a run on reserves and a freeze on North Korean accounts.

Those accounts were eventually unfrozen as North Korea's condition for joining the next stage of Six-Party talks. Since that time, however, relations have only gotten worse. No meaningful dialogue has taken place since Obama took office, and the U.S. continues to pile more sanctions upon North Korea. The U.S. has sanctioned and pressured other nations to sanction North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank, that nation's primary conduit for financing

foreign trade. This was followed by sanctions on the Daedong Credit Bank, and the U.S. has promised to squeeze North Korea through further sanctions.

We are at an impasse. The Obama Administration will not talk with North Korea until it starts to denuclearize without getting anything in return. From the North Korean perspective, it cannot dismantle its nuclear program as long as the U.S. maintains a hostile policy. Clearly, a step-by-step approach is called for, but that option is off the table.

With talks on denuclearization seemingly blocked, the prospect of a peace treaty is even less encouraging.

In the present circumstances it appears that there are only two possible paths to the United States signing a peace treaty or agreeing to the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. A peace treaty could be included as one of the steps in a negotiated denuclearization process arrived at in Six-Party talks, assuming that a way can be found to end the Obama Administration's refusal to negotiate.

The other path is if sanctions succeed in bringing about the collapse of North Korea, and peace is established on U.S. terms.

It is important to note that the inclusion of the promise of a peace treaty in a denuclearization agreement is no guarantee of its actual implementation.

One of the motifs in the Six-Party talks was that the U.S. front-loaded obligations on North Korea while committing only to discuss issues after those steps had been implemented. When the United States agreed to later discussion of issues of concern to North Korea, this did not necessarily mean that it would ultimately agree to their implementation.

One former South Korean negotiator recalled how his American counterparts asked his delegation to present a tough front, in order to make U.S. offers to North Korea appear more attractive in contrast. In subsequent discussions with American officials, the South Korean negotiator discovered that the commitment to carry out those offers was lacking. "How could I guarantee that my side would be a bad and tough cop, when the other side cannot be counted on to be a reliably good cop?" he wondered. (1)

Similarly, just two weeks after the United States signed the September 2005 Joint Agreement, which obligated it to take steps to normalize relations with North Korea, U.S. negotiator Christopher Hill spoke before Congress. Normalization of relations, he explained, would be "subject to resolution of our longstanding concerns. By this I meant that as a necessary part of the process leading to normalization, we must discuss important issues, including human rights, biological and chemical weapons, ballistic missile programs, proliferation of conventional weapons, terrorism and other illicit activities." North Korea "would have to commit to international standards across the board, and then prove its intentions." (2) In other words, even if North Korea were to fully denuclearize, relations would still not move toward normalization. North Korea would only be faced with a host of additional demands.

It can be expected that a peace treaty would face the same barriers. The United States could promise to discuss the subject after denuclearization and then when the time comes, use other issues to justify the refusal to sign a treaty. Even if a treaty is implemented one day, a peace treaty is not the same thing as normalization of relations. Aside from regime change,

there is no conceivable scenario in which the United States would agree to normalization of relations. If the North Korean economy does not offer a welcoming environment for U.S. investors, then U.S. policy will not change. Cuba is a relevant example of a nation at peace with the U.S., yet subject to unrelenting U.S. hostility.

If, despite all obstacles, a peace treaty is signed one day, it is unlikely to alter the U.S.-South Korean military alliance. American policymakers are already implementing plans to change the alliance in ways that are unrelated to the situation on the Korean Peninsula, and that process will continue regardless of any agreement that may be reached with North Korea.

There is something of a precedent. More than two decades after German reunification and the end of the Cold War, U.S. military forces remain stationed in Germany and NATO has transformed itself from an ostensibly defensive organization into one that conducts offensive out-of-area operations.

American officials have made it plain that the U.S.-South Korean military alliance should serve a broader purpose beyond the Korean Peninsula. They point to South Korea's supporting role in Iraq and Afghanistan as models for the future of the alliance, and suggest that deeper involvement in U.S. operations is expected in the future. According to the Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, "The crafters of the alliance must constantly push themselves to forge areas of common cooperation that increasingly define the alliance outside of a peninsular context." (3)

If South Korea is going to participate more fully in U.S. interventions, then an important component of the expanded alliance is to ensure the interoperability of weaponry, and along these lines South Korea is in the process of modernizing its arsenal. As the Brookings Institution points out, an upgrade in military technology "will facilitate future cooperation" and the "lack of these capabilities" results in "the inability for South Korea to fully participate as an equal partner on U.S.-led international efforts." (4)

South Korea will have to work with NATO if it is going to increase its participation in U.S. interventions. It has joined NATO's Individual Partnership Cooperation Program, which promotes "practical cooperation in a number of joint priority areas," including what is euphemistically called "multinational peace support operations." (5)

The agreement that South Korea signed with NATO has not been made public, but it is reasonable to suppose that its contents are similar to the Australia-NATO agreement. That agreement specifies that the partnership "aims to support NATO's strategic objectives...by enhancing support for NATO's operations and missions." (6)

Various policy institutes in Washington are working together with U.S. officials to outline the future of the alliance. A survey of government officials and policy analysts ranked the Center for Strategic and International Studies as the most important American think tank in the area of security and international affairs.(7) Like most such institutes, its board is comprised primarily of former government officials who have considerable influence on the formation of policy.

As the Center puts it, "the time is ripe to establish a considerably more comprehensive alliance," and "an exclusive focus on peninsular security is a luxury South Korea can no longer afford." Among other things, it says, a restructured alliance would "serve as a visible constraint" against the Chinese. (8)

The key component in a restructured alliance is “strategic flexibility,” in which U.S. forces stationed in South Korea can freely intervene anywhere in Asia. Plans are in place for the U.S. 8th Army to be redesignated as a field army by 2017. That would allow it to command other U.S. and multinational forces, and its role would no longer be confined solely to the defense of South Korea. Its mission will become global. (9)

Whether or not a peace treaty is signed, the U.S. military has no intention of leaving the Korean Peninsula. The U.S. military presence in the region is a guarantee for American economic interests, helping to ensure the free flow of capital. A forward-based military presence combined with the soft power of free trade agreements ensures economic liberalization and, as the Foreign Policy Initiative explains, “increase[s] the access of American businesses and investors to foreign markets.” (10)

South Korea has an important role to play, as the Center for U.S. Korea Policy suggests: “Korea’s overseas engagements can promote U.S. geopolitical interests in key countries and regions.” (11)

President Obama has vowed that the United States “will play a larger and long-term role in shaping” Asia and its future, adding, “Our enduring interests in the region demand our enduring presence in the region.”

U.S. officials have no motivation to sign a peace treaty; it is not in their interests. A certain level of tension provides political cover for the broader purposes behind the U.S. military presence, and North Korea is the pretext for encircling China with an anti-ballistic missile system.

However, South Korea’s geostrategic importance to the U.S. means that if the expression of popular will is strong enough, it may be difficult to ignore. In the years ahead, if a more progressive government comes to power in South Korea, the United States may not be able to exclude a peace treaty from a denuclearization settlement, nor indeed to say no to engagement in the first place.

American policymakers are keenly aware of South Korea’s history of popular democracy. The Center for a New American Security complains that one of the main challenges to reconfiguring the U.S.-South Korea relationship into a global interventionist alliance is what it terms “populist fervor in Korea.” The threat of street demonstrations must be overcome, it argues, in order to push through plans for a more global role for the alliance. (13)

It is that Korean democratic spirit that has the potential of compelling the U.S. to pay heed, to put a peace treaty on the agenda, and to give that treaty substance so that it does not become an empty gesture. Although the U.S. is unlikely to normalize relations with North Korea, a peace treaty would significantly improve the prospects of normalization of relations between the two Koreas. It may prove impossible to dislodge the U.S. military from the Korean Peninsula or to block it from using Korea as a launch pad for interventions elsewhere in Asia, but popular resistance can certainly block South Korea from joining those interventions. These would be meaningful victories.

NOTES

(1) James L. Schoff and Yaron Eisenberg, “Peace Regime Building on the Korean Peninsula: What Next?”, Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, May 2009.

- (2) "The Six-Party Talks and the North Korean Nuclear Issue: Old Wine in New Bottles?", Hearing Before the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, October 6, 2005.
- (3) Scott Snyder, "Strengthening the U.S.-ROK Alliance," Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, The Asia Foundation, February 2009.
- (4) "Opportunities for U.S.-ROK Alliance Cooperation: New Issues on the Agenda," The Brookings Institution, Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies, October 8, 2009.
- (5) "NATO and the Republic of Korea Sign a New Partnership Programme," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, September 20, 2012.
- (6) "Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme between Australia and NATO," February 21, 2013.
- (7) "2012 Global Go To Think Tanks Report and Policy Advice," Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program, International Relations Program, University of Pennsylvania, January 28, 2013.
- (8) Scott Snyder, "Pursuing a Comprehensive Vision for the U.S.-South Korea Alliance," Center for Strategic and International Studies," April 2009.
- (9) Ashley Rowland, "U.S. Army in South Korea Begins Transformation of Forces," Stars and Stripes, August 25, 2010.
- (10) "Securing U.S. Interests and Values in the Asia-Pacific," The Foreign Policy Initiative, The Asia-Pacific Strategy Working Group, June 4, 2013.
- (11) Scott Snyder, "Strengthening the U.S.-ROK Alliance," Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, The Asia Foundation, February 2009.
- (12) Press Release, "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, November 17, 2011.
- (13) Kurt M. Campbell, Victor D. Cha, Lindsey Ford, Kazuyo Kato, Nirav Patel, Randy Schriver, Vikram J. Singh, "Going Global: The Future of the U.S.-South Korea Alliance," Center for a New American Security, February 2009.

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