



## **Practical Steps From War to Peace on the Korean Peninsula** by Scott Snyder and Kim Dal Choong

U.S. participants in a meeting with Korean scholars at Cheju Island in mid-September welcomed the hopes for peace symbolized by the inter-Korean summit, and were pleased – not jealous – that South Korea is leading direct contacts with the DPRK. A little over three months after Kim Dae-jung's historic dialogue in Pyongyang with his counterpart Kim Jong-il, however, some Americans and South Koreans still question the extent of North Korea's change of heart and worry whether the two Korean leaders will be strong, sincere, and consistent enough to sustain the budding Korean peace process by taking real steps to remove the threat of war between the two sides.

The DPRK's apparent lack of institutional depth and ROK domestic political divisions over the outcome of the summit constitute potential obstacles that must be overcome to continue making concrete steps toward peace. It is desirable to initiate an even more intensive and wide-ranging U.S.-ROK policy coordination process (expanding on and deepening the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group initiated by former Defense Secretary William Perry) so that the United States – along with Korea's other neighbors – may properly acknowledge and show support for concrete movements toward peace on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia.

The emergence of North Korea's supreme leader on the international stage to greet his counterpart at Sunan Airport was a necessary condition for initiating a Korean peace process, but Kim Jong-il's public appearance alone is not sufficient to end inter-Korean hostilities or to overcome mistrust between former enemies. In fact, the DPRK military has conducted a rather robust schedule of military exercises during the past year despite its new-found engagement with the international community and with South Korea. Chairman Kim Jong-il must lead his military to take the steps necessary to make the mutual promises of non-aggression contained in the 1992 Basic Agreement irreversible. He must also open the way both for infrastructure investment in North Korea, including the expansion of training of North Korean government officials in international law, business, and other fields so that the technical difficulties of doing business in North Korea may be overcome. If Kim Jong-il shows consistency and sincerity by taking these steps, it will remove the doubts of many who are still skeptical of North Korean intentions, provide momentum to a Korean peace process, and help to resolve North Korea's most pressing economic difficulties.

South Korea's domestic political divisions constitute another threat to consolidation of an inter-Korean peace

process. Longstanding regional factionalism and competition among personalities has been suddenly infused by long-suppressed ideological divisions in a nation originally founded on anti-Communist principles. Failures of domestic governance, including concerns about renewed economic crisis and the perception that the current government is either oblivious to or uncaring about local concerns that affect people on a daily basis, are weakening support for Kim Dae-jung's successful engagement of the North. The domestic political quagmire is likely only to become even more intractable as political maneuvering begins in anticipation of the next presidential election two years from now. Will time run out on Kim Dae-jung and jeopardize his Sunshine Policy? If so, what types of options might be left to the successor government?

The U.S. government needs to be considerably more attentive to the potentially significant changes that are occurring on the Korean Peninsula and should work much more intensively with Korean allies to support the reduction of inter-Korean tension. In fact, a completely new U.S. defense policy in Asia will need to be re-fashioned if a sustainable Korean peace process is truly under way. South Korean public perceptions and concerns must be actively taken into account as part of a re-evaluation of the nature and manifestations of the U.S.-ROK security relationship. The following suggestions for dealing with these issues were put forward.

The next U.S. administration should consider the appointment of a Presidential envoy with authority to coordinate policy in Northeast Asia in anticipation of further changes on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. Such an envoy would be able to mobilize U.S. support for South Korean engagement with the North and deepen the trilateral and regional policy coordination efforts originally initiated by former Defense Secretary William Perry.

The next U.S. administration should undertake a comprehensive review of U.S.-ROK security relations analogous to the U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines process that occurred between the United States and Japan in the mid-1990s. The purpose of such a review would be to re-define the purposes and reaffirm the objectives of the security relationship, to respond to changes in the regional security environment and the inter-Korean relationship, and to respond to problems in the relationship that have arisen as a result of South Korea's own democratization and the negative effects of some U.S. bases on the quality of life in local districts.

Joint working-level policy studies should be undertaken to explore how the United States and the ROK might anticipate and properly sequence the responses involving the

United States as part of inter-Korean tension reduction. For instance, advance agreement is needed on the timing for negotiating issues that involve the United States such as the future of the UN Command, how to address North Korean weapons of mass destruction programs, and the question of how to incorporate U.S. troop reductions on the Peninsula if indeed North Korea shows a willingness to pursue mutual arms reduction measures.

If a Korean peace process is successful, the U.S. troop presence in South Korea should be adjusted downward significantly in recognition of the removal of the threat from North Korea. If the Korean government and public support a continued security relationship with the United States, a U.S. defense presence may still be desirable to support regional stability and prevent the re-emergence of conflict among regional powers that has historically affected the Korean Peninsula. One hypothetical configuration focused on response to regional contingencies would involve a significantly decreased U.S. army presence, continued pre-positioning of equipment and supplies in Korea, and a residual air and naval presence aimed at assuring stability in the event of crises in the Asia-Pacific region.

The beginning of a Korean peace process is a potentially significant development that should be welcomed both in Korea and among major regional powers, including the United States. U.S.-ROK alliance cooperation should be focused on ensuring that this nascent Korean peace process is carefully cultivated and nurtured while continuing to guard against reversion to military confrontation. We have little to fear and much to gain if the current process brings true peace to the Korean Peninsula.

*Scott Snyder is Representative of the Korea office of The Asia Foundation. Kim Dal Choong is President of the Sejong Institute. The opinions contained here, based on the discussions held at a September 20-22 conference including American, South Korean, and Japanese policy analysts, represent their own views and not those of their institutions or those of the conference participants.*