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Changing Course in Northeast Asia by James Goodby

No issue is more timely or more consequential for the long-term peace and security of the world than the creation of a new framework to promote regional stability in Northeast Asia. Three major wars involving the United States were fought in Asia in the middle decades of the last century. Currently the likelihood of war in the region is very low but the peace is still conditional. Cold War structures live on in the form of the U.S.-Korea and U.S.-Japan security treaties, and these still serve important security needs. Something that might augment these arrangements, in particular, a multilateral organization for security and cooperation in Northeast Asia has been discussed for years. Both liberal and conservative administrations in South Korea have pushed the idea, seeing it as a way of forestalling a repeat of the tragedies that have afflicted the nation in centuries past when Korea became the victim of its powerful neighbors. But the dream has remained beyond their grasp.

In the meantime, nationalism is on the march. China and South Korea are as one in denouncing Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's visits to a shrine and museum that depict Japan's role in World War II in a favorable light. Minor territorial disputes are becoming magnified. Japanese public opinion, in response, is becoming more critical of its Asian neighbors. While Japan seeks closer relations with Washington to offset the rise of China, China and Russia are collaborating to reduce U.S. influence in Asia. These trends are still moving at relatively superficial levels but they are omens of more serious conflicts ahead. A multilateral organization is not a panacea: many sensitive issues will continue to be handled through other channels. But over time it could encourage a different pattern of relationships to evolve. The present pattern is clearly not sufficient to lead the nations of the region to a stable peace.

Launching a new organization for security and cooperation is not an easy thing to do or it would have been done already. The process has been hampered, among other things, by the absence of a final settlement of the Korean War. The war lingers and continues to create tensions. The armistice signed in 1953 brought an end to the shooting but left a genuine peace to the wisdom of succeeding generations, who have not been equal to the task. This situation is not just another remnant of untidiness from past wars: it is directly relevant to the North Korean nuclear threat. Experience suggests that while negotiations focusing narrowly on nuclear weapons programs may yield transitory success, the agreements are not sustainable over the long run, and that a broader context will be necessary to buttress them.

The U.S. is better positioned than any of the regional powers to take the lead in changing the geopolitical context in Northeast Asia. America's geography and its history, not to mention its immense power, render it relatively free of the historical and cultural baggage carried by Asian nations. Until very recently the Bush administration has not seen fit to exercise this unique role. But unnoticed by most of the world, in recent weeks evidence has appeared that suggests that this reluctance may be giving way to an awareness of the vast potential the U.S. has for bringing a stable peace to Northeast Asia.

On Sept. 19, the administration accepted a statement in the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear program that went far beyond its usual stance. That statement was the first in many years – perhaps ever – to imply that there might be a common political, economic, and security agenda that would link China, Japan, Russia, the two Koreas, and the U.S. It opened the door to a permanent organization for security and cooperation in the region and it also called for a separate forum to negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

These policy beachheads were expanded during President Bush's recent trip to Asia. President Bush and President Roh of South Korea agreed on Nov. 14 that "discussions on a peace regime [in Korea] should take place amongst directly-related parties in a forum separate from the Six-Party Talks." They also agreed "to make common efforts to develop a regional multilateral security dialogue and a cooperation mechanism, so as to jointly respond to regional security issues." Tangible results from these commitments may take time to materialize. But one thing is clear: issues that could fundamentally change the political and security landscape of the region are now inscribed on the international agenda.

Northeast Asia is one of the few regions of the world where there is no multilateral organization dedicated to enhancing security and cooperation. South Asia and the Middle East are two other examples and the recurrent violence that afflicts those regions is precisely what Northeast Asian nations should want to avoid. The absence of a mechanism that makes cooperation a habit among nations is also one of the reasons why Northeast Asia remains infected by the poisonous legacies of the Cold War, and even of World War II, as can be witnessed almost daily.

What would a mandate for a permanent security mechanism in Northeast Asia look like? The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is certainly not a blueprint for how things should be done in Asia, but the experience from another time and another place does offer some insights. One of them is that a comprehensive agenda provides a context within which disparate problems can be solved, partly because it encourages tradeoffs among diverging national interests. The predecessor of the OSCE, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was a mechanism created in 1975 in Helsinki by 35 European

and North American nations. These nations agreed on very little but each of them saw advantages for themselves in a comprehensive charter called the Helsinki Final Act. The charter included security, economics, and the human dimension and it launched the process that helped to end the Cold War in Europe. A charter for security and cooperation in Northeast Asia could include agreements not to use or threaten force in the mutual relations of its members; to enhance transparency in military affairs; to cooperate in developing the energy and transportation infrastructure in Northeast Asia; to work for the improvement of human welfare everywhere; to develop cultural and historical awareness; and to encourage the freer movement of people, information, and ideas across borders. The latter was one of the key components of the Helsinki Final Act. All of that is a tall order and the nations interested in this project should lose no time in doing the homework necessary to make it a reality. It took the NATO members about three years of hard work before they were ready even to begin the talks about what became the Helsinki Final Act of 1975.

The idea of a peace settlement in Korea is more advanced conceptually than is that of a regional security forum. A remarkable agreement between South and North Korea that came into effect in February 1992 defined a peace settlement about as well as it could be in an agreement limited to North and South Korea. It came to be known as the "Basic Agreement" because of its wide-ranging commitments. The agreement called for ceilings on the armed forces of the two sides and for military confidence-building measures. It called for economic cooperation. And it included provisions that resemble those in the Helsinki Final Act as regards freer movement of people, information, and ideas. Unfortunately, this agreement was never implemented. The blame for that lies mainly with North Korea, but South Korea has rarely made an issue of this, perhaps regarding the agreement as a relic of the past or a trophy of a previous administration.

Before consigning the Basic Agreement to the limbo of failed experiments, its relevance to today's problems should be re-examined. First, this agreement was approved by the founder of the North Korean state, Kim Il-sung, who died in 1994. That must mean something to his son, Kim Jong-il, the current leader of North Korea. Second, a peace settlement of the type envisaged by Presidents Roh and Bush in their joint statement would almost certainly be the functional equivalent of the Basic Agreement, even if a long process of re-negotiation were conducted. Third, the element that is missing in the Basic Agreement to make it a true peace settlement is the selective engagement and commitments of other nations, most notably the U.S. The Bush-Roh commitments give this North-South agreement a second chance to form the core of a peace settlement that would supersede the Armistice Agreement of 1953. It would furnish a context in which to solve both the nuclear issue and improve the desperate condition of the people of North Korea. Washington should challenge North and South Korea to revive the Basic Agreement and should offer to make the commitments and take the actions necessary to support that agreement and to convert it into a true peace settlement.

Whether the recent welcome shifts in the administration's policies will convince North Korea that it should cooperate in the Six-Party Talks is uncertain. It would be a tragedy for everyone if it did not. Vice President Cheney was right in a broader sense than he probably intended when he remarked in April 2004 that "time is not necessarily on our side." He was speaking of North Korea's nuclear programs, but he could have been speaking of other dangers, as well.

It is possible that North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-il, has decided that his state must be at least a "virtual" nuclear weapons state no matter what inducements it is offered or what pressures are placed upon it. If that proves to be the case, a peace settlement will not be possible but the U.S. and its friends would be foolishly short-sighted to give North Korea a veto over the creation of a permanent institution to enhance security and cooperation in Northeast Asia. This would be needed more than ever if North Korea insisted on retaining a nuclear deterrent.

One of America's diplomatic advantages has been its ability to leverage its own power through rule-based multilateral organizations that are transparent and that require steady commitments. In its first term, the Bush team sacrificed this advantage. But now the president has the opportunity in Northeast Asia again to be "present at the creation," as Secretary of State Dean Acheson called the institution-building period at the end of World War II that ushered in the "long peace" in Europe. The policy shifts made by the administration recently in Asia are encouraging but they will need top-level attention and serious follow-through. This will not be easy.

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