



Creating a peace regime in Korea by James Goodby

The Bush administration reportedly is considering an offer to join in talks with North Korea, South Korea, and China to create a “peace regime” on the Korean Peninsula. But, what exactly is a “peace regime”? It has been described as a peace treaty, but it is not to be confused with the task of liquidating the machinery of the 1953 Armistice Agreement that ended the shooting in the Korean War. That could be done through a legal document something like the treaty that surrendered quadripartite rights in Berlin and Germany as a whole in 1990.

No, a peace regime is not just about ending an outdated arrangement. Rather, it involves a whole range of state-to-state and people-to-people relationships, all designed to promote security and cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. And yet a peace regime is not the same as full reconciliation and peaceful reunification of the two Koreas. In the long run, democratic institutions and practices throughout the Peninsula is what will keep the peace and unify Korea. A peace regime is but a step in that direction, but it must include features that would promote that outcome.

The best approximation of what a peace regime might look like is the 1992 Basic Agreement between North and South Korea, long considered a dead letter but still a reliable blueprint for a political settlement. Chapter 1 of that agreement is about reconciliation. Chapter 2 speaks of phased reductions in armaments including the elimination of weapons of mass destruction. Chapter 3 speaks of freedom of intra-Korean travel, cooperation in the international arena, and in journalism and the media, as well as economic cooperation. What the Basic Agreement lacks is a mechanism to involve other countries – specifically the United States and China – in supporting and reinforcing the provisions of the Agreement. Talks on a peace regime should be held in parallel with the Six-Party Talks because it will help to resolve the nuclear weapons issue with North Korea; changes on North-South relations are taking place anyway.

The negotiating process for a peace regime could unfold in essentially two ways: one would amount to a formal negotiation between governments, designed to arrive at a comprehensive political settlement. This is what the declaration between Presidents George W. Bush and Roh Moo-hyun last November envisaged. They spoke of “discussions on a peace regime... amongst directly related parties in a forum separate from the Six-Party Talks.” This is what the administration is reportedly now considering.

The alternative is a piecemeal approach: small steps which, through the process of accretion, begin to create a *de facto* peace regime. And this is what already is happening in Korea. This is the way regimes often are created, rather than through elaborate negotiations. The U.S.-Soviet restraint

regime during the Cold War was created in this way. It is an “organic” approach in the sense that small advances permit additional advances, rather like the process through which coral reefs are built.

The growing economic and travel ties between North and South Korea offer examples of this approach. The process is at odds with the U.S. approach to North Korea, but this incremental regime-building process will probably continue in the absence of more formal talks. Other countries, China and Russia among them, are joining in this process.

The Bush administration is well advised to try to establish a framework in which the United States would be formally and continuously engaged in reaching a political settlement on the Korean Peninsula, and the other relevant parties would be wise to seize this opportunity as well.

The incremental process cannot advance beyond a certain point. Major unresolved security issues, such as the North Korean nuclear weapons program, will place real impediments in the way of North Korea’s full integration into the regional and global economy. Parallel talks on a peace regime and the nuclear issue make good sense.

Presidents Bush and Roh also agreed in a Nov. 17, 2005 joint declaration “to make common efforts to develop a regional multilateral security dialogue and a cooperation mechanism so as to jointly respond to regional security issues.” Any regime-building process, no matter how it is done, needs to be buttressed by a multilateral support system. Korea’s long history shows how much the safety and well-being of the Korean people depend on relations with their neighbors. Northeast Asia is one of the very few regions of the world that lacks an organization to promote security and cooperation among the nations of the region – and it shows.

Now that the administration seems ready to engage in serious negotiation, it is not too early to begin consultations on what such a mechanism would do and how it would relate to a peace regime.

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