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A Complex Strategy to Overcome the Yeonpyeong Incident

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The Need for a Complex Strategy toward North Korea

Since North Korea's deadly artillery barrage on Yeonpyeong Island, South Korea has been stepping up efforts in its defense posture and international cooperation. In preparing against any further provocation from the North, Seoul has been reinforcing forces on the island, strengthening defense and deterrence capabilities, and drastically increasing its defense budget. Somewhat belatedly, it has also been taking up actions to reexamine the strategies of the ROK-U.S. military alliance, demanding cooperation from China and Russia while maintaining the traditional trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan. Of course, analyzing the causes of the weak response to the shelling and preparing to prevent further provocations are undoubtedly important. However, reading the bigger picture and formulating key strategies for the future is a far more critical task. The Kim Jong-il/Kim Jong-un leadership in November 2010 conducted two consecutive moves—revealing its uranium enrichment facilities and launching an artillery strike on Yeonpyeong Island. Understanding the situation of the whole East Asian region, while at the same time anticipating Pyongyang's strategies and taking preemptive actions will be the main challenges ahead for Seoul.

Firstly, it is important to understand the range of North Korea's strategic options from aggressive diplomacy to peaceful diplomacy.

The Korean Peninsula went through the Korean War in 1950 and following of the ceasefire, both Koreas were stuck between 'hot war' and 'cold war.' Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world has passed the stage of 'cold peace' and moved towards a 'hot peace.' In spite of this global shift, North Korea has been frequently using combinations of 'cold war,' 'hot war,' 'cold peace,' and 'hot peace' on the international strategic chessboard. For example, during the Cold War period North Korea provoked the South in a number of cases: Rangoon bombing (1983), bombing of Korean Air Flight 858 (1987), attempted Blue House raid (1968), North Korean infiltration in the Uljin and Samcheok areas (1968). Even in the post-Cold War period, nuclear tests, naval battles in the Yellow Sea, the sinking of *Cheonan* naval ship and the shelling on Yeonpyeong Island ensued. At the same time, Pyongyang has been aggressively demanding for a peace agreement to this day.

The possibility for limited warfare on the Korean Peninsula came dangerously close with the recent Yeonpyeong shelling, more so than the last North Korean provocation, the sinking of the *Cheonan*. As the pendulum of war and peace on the Korean Peninsula swung from the 'cold war' to 'hot war,' greater chaos arise. It is expected that the Kim Jong-il/Kim Jong-un regime will try to maximize the use of this pendulum of peace and war in order to strengthen Kim Jong-un's weak power base.

In spite of the dangers, merely worrying about the possibility of war is not going to

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help. Rather, we have to understand precisely why the North has raised the bar of aggression from acts of terrorism to that of a direct artillery attack on South Korean territory. It is likely that the North would pursue a ‘cold peace’ offensive to utilize the amplitude of the pendulum. A complex picture emerges when looking back on the recent comments made by top officials from North Korea, the United States, and China. Seoul and Washington have called for Pyongyang to engage in measures for active denuclearization and reengagement in inter-Korean relations as preconditions for resuming the Six-Party Talks. North Korea on the other hand has taken precisely the opposite measures. To read what the North Korean regime has in mind we have to think of the situation not as a motionless snapshot but as a moving footage. Furthermore, South Korea must do more than just respond to North Korea’s actions. Instead it should focus on making strategically preemptive moves. For this, it is necessary to examine why the North Korean regime expanded the pendulum’s amplitude and find measures to make the leadership pursue a survival strategy that does not include huddling around nuclear weapons.

As was demonstrated in the Yeonpyeong Incident, Kim Jong-il is passing down exactly what he has learned from his father, Kim Il-sung, to his son, Kim Jong-un. Following the pattern of brinkmanship, Kim Jong-il showed a strong determination for ‘nuclearization’ instead of ‘denuclearization,’ ‘deterioration’ of relations, not ‘improvement.’ Obviously, the next step will be a ‘clinch’ strategy to buy time, such as allowing IAEA inspections or resuming the Six-Party Talks thus the pendulum will swing towards peace. But these are ‘salami tactics’ to successfully establish the Kim Jong-un regime. As of now, neither ‘full-scale war’

nor ‘reform with denuclearization’ is included in the range of North Korea’s strategic options.

On the other hand, South Korea has the problem with its narrow range of options. Compared to North Korea’s pendulum widely swinging from ‘cold war’ to ‘hot war,’ South Korea’s pendulum swings narrowly between the Sunshine Policy and sanctions. For Seoul, a more comprehensive strategy must be utilized against Pyongyang including measures for military, diplomacy, and unification. Most importantly, in order to stop the North increasing its use of belligerence to bring the Korean Peninsula to brink of full-scale war, South Korea needs to work more closely with the United States to devise military capabilities for deterrence, ‘defensive defense,’ and ‘offensive defense.’ Altogether such measures will strip North Korea’s options to use organized provocations.

The issue here is whether or not Kim Jong-un will inherit his father’s will— *songun* or the military-first politics—to run the next regime. After Kim Il-sung’s death in 1994, the consequences of Kim Jong-il’s choice of military-first politics, was to go through an “Arduous March.” If Kim Jong-un chooses to inherit and continue with the military-first politics, a worst fate will befall him. What then can be done to dissuade Kim Jong-un from inheriting the legacy of his father and repeating the path of failure? The answer is complex strategies. First, South Korea needs to make the North realize that the military-first politics focused on nuclear development will only result in total collapse of the regime. The worn out efforts for the Sunshine Policy or sanctions must be put aside and a more effective policy must replace them. In short, a simultaneous approach should be taken: it must prepare for a method to incapacitate North

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Korea's belligerence while framing a comprehensive peace system to better respond against the North's peace offensive. The Sunshine Policy can increase limited exchanges, but it cannot bring about fundamental changes in the military-first politics. Taking off the coat is not enough. We need a change in the DNA sequence.

North Korea's denuclearization is possible if and only if the succeeding regime abandons the old system and pursues a new nuclear-free strategy. This will require political figures to demote military-first politics as the central priority while at the same time it will need comprehensive efforts from South Korea, the United States, and Japan to provide security assurances. For this, a very comprehensive security system is needed to assure North Korea of its future. Furthermore, on top of the efforts to find a way to denuclearize the North, regional and global financial support systems should be established. In a long-run, the North and related states should pursue a strategy of coevolution for the 21st century development of North Korea.

Pursuing a Complex Diplomacy with China

The most important yet the most difficult task in a comprehensive strategy towards North Korea is the policies regarding China. Chinese influence on North Korea is critical. As is well known, China has been unhappy with North Korea in recent years over the lack of basic communication as the North Korean regime pursues its extreme military-first policies without consultations with its sole ally. In spite of this, Beijing has always chosen to back Pyongyang to some extent. Putting its economy as the first priority, China is choosing the

lesser of two evils, maintaining the North Korean regime over provoking its possible collapse which would result in a disaster for Northeast China. Therefore, cooperation with China is as important as trilateral cooperation with the U.S. and Japan for resolving the North Korean problem.

Sensing the relative decline of the United States, China with its own rise is taking advantage and has recently made strong comments against the U.S. policies. This stands in contrast to the 1990s when China candidly acknowledged the power gap between them and rather focused on its own economy while delicately making moves in international politics. It is interesting that China maintains the principles of *Taoguang Yanghui* (Bide our time, build our capacities) and *Yousuo Zuowei* (Doing some things to make our voice heard in the world) yet has increasingly been taking a more assertive position toward the United States. This is in part related to the fact that China's confidence grew after the global financial crisis, but what deserves attention at the same time is the influence of domestic politics on its foreign policy. With a leadership succession due in 2012, China is in the midst of a political competition to clarify its global position through its foreign policy. During the power shift, those who clearly express China's confidence on the world stage will have a more advantageous position in domestic political power competition. This clarification of its global position can be best shown in its strategies against the United States. Hence, domestic politics are invoking China to make critical comments against the U.S. policies.

The question is whether it is appropriate for China to raise its voice against the United States at this time. In 2008, on the 30th anniversary of 'Reforms and Openness', Hu Jintao

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proclaimed that the country will achieve a high level of *Xiaokang Shehui* (a moderately prosperous society) by 2021, which will mark the 100th anniversary of Chinese Communist Party. As of now, GDP per capita is 4,000 dollars and by 2021, it is likely to break the 10,000 dollars mark. However, Hu Jintao has proclaimed that 2049 as the year that China will truly aim for. That year represents not merely an economic goal but a more fundamental and broader one: showing the world China as a new standard of civilization.

Against this backdrop, both Beijing and Washington are trying to forecast the outcome of the U.S.-China summit which will be held in January, 2011. The talks are unlikely to break down in the middle of the summit but it is expected that sealing a deal will be tough. Although the United States is in relative decline since 2008 with China on the rise, the process of this trend will be slower than expected. When a major historical current flows in a particular direction, self-management can make the decisive difference about the status of the states. The United States belatedly realized the danger of decline and now has been pursuing its own comprehensive strategy in order to adapt to the changing environment.

The future East Asian order will be more complex than China expects, and no clear blueprint has been suggested by policy makers in Beijing. This was well reflected in the recent competition between the United States and China for framework building of the East Asian order for the 21st century.

The U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton gave a speech titled “America’s Engagement in the Asia-Pacific” in late Octo-

ber, 2010.¹ The speech as basically detailed America’s comprehensive policies in the Asia-Pacific region. Of course the U.S. engagement strategy includes military measures, but it is far more complex. That is, it will not take on the zero-sum perspective like it did during the Cold War. Rather the United States will promote friendly relations with newly rising states such as China, India, and ASEAN states, while also maintaining strengthened ties with five allied states, such as South Korea and Japan in East Asia. The speech also implies Washington’s willingness to engage international organizations in the region. By broadening the scope of engagement, Secretary of State Clinton is framing the U.S. smart power which appropriately combines soft power and hard power in the areas of 3D (diplomacy, development, and defense).

By contrast, China has yet to break away from the old habit of seeing things from a dichotomous view. It is looking at the world through a narrow window of power struggle and balance of power for national interests, which is the core principle in the modern international order. With this narrow view, China cannot catch up with the United States. In the Cold War era, the world was divided into two by the United States and Soviet Union. But the new order of 21st century is much more complicated. It will be harder for China to muster more powers than the United States with this dichotomous world view.

For instance, Chinese politicians, media, and scholars look at the former South Korean administration as pro-China and the current

¹ U.S. Department of State, “America’s Engagement in the Asia-Pacific,” October 28, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/10/150141.htm#> (Accessed December 30, 2010).

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administration as pro-U.S., when in reality there is much more diversity of views in South Korean government. In fact, Seoul is trying to improve its relation with China without loosening its important relationship with the United States and Japan. If China misunderstands these efforts not as *Lian Mei Lian Zhong* (Being connected to United States and China at the same time) but as *Lian Mei Kang Zhong* (Being connected to United States to counter China), it is missing the bigger picture of this era. China should no longer apply its dichotomous view in evaluating South Korea and must try to recognize Seoul's pro-U.S./China policy.

For South Korea, the need for U.S.-China cooperation is vital. If the United States and China turn their backs on each other, South Korea will be forced to make a difficult decision. While the Cold War still exists on the Korean Peninsula, the global order, even U.S.-China relations are not like that of the Cold War period. Although there are several conflicting elements, mutual cooperation between the two states is inescapable as has been clearly shown through their economic relations. South Korea and China are also too mutually dependent to break away from each other. In terms of economy and investment, China has become the largest partner for South Korea. Therefore, Seoul has to hold friendly relations with both Beijing and Washington. For this, U.S.-China relations should be enhanced. If Chinese leaders pressure South Korea to make a choice between the traditional alliance with United States and the new partnership with China, it will not do much to help China to expand its influence in the world. Currently, the United States is making great efforts to include everyone in its network except a few outlier states such as North Korea and Iran.

On the other hand, China's network is relatively too simple.

Expanding ties with China while strengthening the alliance with the United States is the way South Korea must go. It is woefully difficult for a weaker state to maneuver a stronger state for the former's benefit, if not impossible. As the famous 18th century Korean scholar, Ji Won Park pointed out in his work *Heo Sang Jeon, "Bok Bul"* (an expedition to conquer the north which means China) has its limits. Rather he emphasized network diplomacy by using marriage, commerce, and education to the greatest extent. South Korea should follow the advice of Ji Won Park in the 21st century. Through the three steps of 'expansion,' 'intensification' and 'trust building,' South Korea should make China formulate a more comprehensive diplomacy which reflects the interest not only of its own but also of South Korea, the Korean Peninsula, East Asia and the world.

Overcoming the Split in South Korean Public Opinion

The most pressing issue for South Korea in carrying out comprehensive policies towards North Korea is how to overcome the split in public opinion. From the *Cheonan* incident to the Yeonpyeong Island attack, strong conflicts prevail among South Koreans both in cyberspace and in reality. It is difficult to push for an effective and refined complex strategy in the midst of this tense atmosphere. What is needed at this moment is a future-oriented policy that can draw out a popular agreement regardless of party affiliation.

For this, South Korea needs to be equipped with bigger pendulum amplitude

than that of the North, and take preemptive actions in an effective way. The current administration's "Grand Bargain" policy falls short in its persuasiveness amidst popular discord. When South Korea recovers from the wound of the attack on Yeonpyeong Island and when the North reinitiates its peace offensive strategy, popular opinion in South Korea is likely to be bipolarized once again. Therefore, South Korea should not only strengthen its readiness for 'cold war' and 'hot war,' but also prepare measures for 'cold peace' and 'hot peace.' In other words, South Korea is required to take a leading role in stopping North Korea from its aggressive diplomacy as well as building a constructive diplomacy for peaceful reunification. Meanwhile, with the precise

understanding of where public opinion is going in this internet era, Seoul needs to suggest a persuasive discourse and carry out open discussion concerning its policy towards North Korea both on the internet and in reality.■

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