

Nuclear-free zones on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast

Asia

Jung Wook Sik from Civil Network for a Peaceful Korea

Clash between becoming a nuclear-have and non-proliferation

We tend to identify nuclear issues on the Korean peninsula with North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Still, nuclear issues on the peninsula can be categorized into three major ones. First, the U.S.' unilateralism and desire for nuclear hegemony has had an influence over the peninsula. Although they were witnessed during the Cold War and even after that, the Bush administration has placed more emphasis on them than ever before.

The U.S. once thought of using nuclear weapons during the Korean War and it has deployed a variety of nuclear weapons in South Korea since the late 1950s as part of massive retaliation strategy for North Korea. It has also simulated using those against the North in ROK-US joint exercises called Team Spirit. Moreover the so-called Bush doctrine includes possible pre-emptive nuclear attack against five nuclear have-nots including North Korea. The U.S. has developed small nuclear warheads which can penetrate into North Korean underground bunkers. All of these have combined to trigger arms race on the peninsula and increase the likelihood of nuclear war.

As these facts suggest, it is the U.S. who is to blame for triggering fear of nuclear disaster in Korea. Still lack of awareness has made these issues receive much less attention than they rightly deserve. Korean society has been insensitive to nuclear threats posed by the U.S., because it has been under the influence of US nuclearism. Korea has also been under the nuclear umbrella as part of US security commitment. So, raising issues with US nuclear weapons has been prohibited in the name of Korea-US alliance. As was the case with the Cold War era, criticizing US nuclear policy is still seen as compromising Korea's security and helping North Korea. Even though the international community has increasingly criticized US nuclear policy as well as North

Korea's nuclear program with the advent of the 21st century, only a small minority in Korea have done so.

Second, when it comes to issues concerning the Korean peninsula, the North's nuclear program has attracted more attention than any other issue since the 1990s. Tension and confrontation between North Korea and the U.S. has been as important as the threat posed by the North's nuclear weapons development.

North Korea didn't feel it necessary to build nuclear arsenal until the end of the Cold War brought about its isolation. North Korea entered the NPT in 1985 at the request of then the Soviet Union. This shows that with the backing from the Soviet Union and China North, Korea didn't feel the need for nuclear weapons and that conditions for nuclear weapons development were not right, either. Just as South Korea was under the US nuclear umbrella, North Korea found a reliable ally in the Soviet Union. Just as the U.S. didn't allow the South to go nuclear, the Soviet Union stopped the North from building nuclear weapons.

But the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with South Korea. Soon after, the Soviet Union was disbanded and Korea formed diplomatic relations with China. All of these combined to bring about significant changes to the security environment on the peninsula. Faced with the changes, the North Korean regime started looking for ways to maintain its grip on power. It tried to maintain or partially improve ties with South Korea and enhance ties with the U.S., Japan and the EU. In the process, Pyoungyang's nuclear program worked in a similar way as projects led by former South Korean President Park Jung Hee to build nuclear weapons and missiles in response to the phased withdrawal of US troops from South Korea envisioned by Nixon and Carter administrations in the 1970s. That is, the nuclear program guaranteed survival for the regime and helped Pyoungyang gain advantage in negotiations to improve relations with the U.S. It also resulted in the Agreed Framework. In the framework, North Korea agreed to give up its program and the U.S. agreed to normalize ties with North Korea and provide the North with alternative energy.

But the survival strategy by North Korea faced a great challenge with the inauguration of the Bush administration. North Korea considered the framework a window of opportunity, only to find it was a lie. On top of that, President Bush

refused to make a compromise with the North and even included Pyoungyang in the axis of evil. The U.S. also started thinking of pre-emptive strike involving nuclear weapons and invaded Iraq with the pretext of weapons of mass destruction. Against this backdrop, there is certain logic to North Korea being tempted to build nuclear arms. North Korea believes that the U.S. is using the six-party talks to drag its feet and make its possible attack against the North legitimate. So North Korea has to be prepared for the failure of diplomacy whether that diplomacy took the form of bilateral talks or multilateral talks. It is always on the mind of North Korea that the U.S. can use the collapse of the talks as an excuse to launch an attack.

Third, the Korean peninsula's geographical location brings about possible clash between South Korea, North Korea or a unified Korea tempted to become a nuclear-have and the international community's zero tolerance for nuclear proliferation. This is the most fundamental nuclear issue. Of the four big powers surrounding the peninsula, the U.S., China and Russia are among the five major nuclear powers and Japan has nuclear capabilities to build hundreds of nuclear weapons a year if it wants. So there is certain logic to South Korea or North Korea turning its attention to nuclear weapons. But the geopolitical environment makes it either impossible or strategically unwise for South Korea, North Korea, or a unified Korea to have nuclear arms. The dilemma has been with two Koreas and it will be in the future as well.

The clash between becoming a nuclear-have and non-proliferation will continue to remain significant. The late 1960s witnessed the announcement of the Nixon doctrine, which basically meant that Asian nations should be responsible for their own defense. It was followed by the pullout of some of the US troops from Korea. President Carter was elected on a platform to withdraw the entire US forces from Korea. This prompted then South Korean President Park Jung Hee to launch Yool-gok project and secretly develop nuclear arms and missiles with a view to enhancing military capabilities. Such attempts ended when President Jun Doo Hwan, who took power through military coup, gave up those programs in return for security assurance and recognition of his government by the Reagan administration. This implies that as long as the Korean peninsula remains a relic of the Cold War, North Korea will aim to have nuclear arms in the face of increased pressure from the U.S. and that South Korea may want to

become a nuclear-have in the event of US security commitment to the nation weakening.

South Korea, North Korea, or even a unified Korea for that matter has good chances of developing nuclear weapons. As long as the U.S. keeps putting North Korea under pressure, North Korea is tempted to build nuclear weapons. If the North does, it will have a domino effect, prompting other Asian nations including South Korea to build nuclear arms. Also, as was the case with the days during President Park Jung Hee's presidency, as long as the security environment surrounding the Korean peninsula and the Northeast Asia remains unchanged, the weakening of US security commitment to South Korea can prompt the nation to build nuclear arms. In the event of the missile defense spanning the U.S., South Korea and Japan becoming a reality, China is likely to strengthen its nuclear capabilities, which will result in Japan moving closer to building nuclear arms. If that happens, nationalism will take the center stage in Korea and prompt the Korean people to call for nuclear weapons development.

This clearly indicates that the nuclear issues on the peninsula caused by the clash between becoming a nuclear-have and non-proliferation have been significant and that they will remain so in the future as well. Controversy, which erupted in September, 2004 over South Korea's nuclear experiment, was yet another example of the clash.

Time to find a creative alternative

How can we deal with the dilemma brought by the clash? Will being under US nuclear umbrella continue to be a solution in the 21st century? Or should we develop our own nuclear weapons as some suggest? Aren't these two seemingly contradictory arguments, one involving dependence and the other involving independence, coming from the same roots, that is nuclearism, because both see nuclear weapons as a means of security?

During the Cold War, when North Korea had alliance with nuclear powers such as China and then the Soviet Union, South Korea had no choice but to be under the US nuclear umbrella. But even after the socialism-based alliance among Soviet Union, China and North Korea became a thing of the past at the end of

the Cold War, South Korea is still part of the nuclear umbrella, citing it as an effective deterrent against possible attacks by North Korea.

In the early 1990s, South Korea normalized ties with China and the Soviet Union, which brought a good deal of peace and stability to the peninsula. Do we still need to be under the nuclear umbrella? South Korea cites uncertainty as one of the reasons for being part of the nuclear umbrella. But doesn't being under the nuclear umbrella deepen uncertainty?

The end of the Cold War and the normalization of ties with China and the Soviet Union at least gave South Korea assurance that it wouldn't be attacked by these nations. A lot of progress in inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation will make the nuclear umbrella with an aim of mass retaliation meaningless. Then US security policy toward Korea including the nuclear umbrella will face challenges. It will also face a fundamental question, "Whose attack do the nuclear umbrella and the missile defense system prevent?"

Also South Korea building nuclear weapons cannot be an alternative. As was the case with North Korea, walking out of the NPT and building nuclear arms would cost South Korea dearly in terms of economy, security and politics. North Korea, South Korea or a unified Korea would face strong opposition from the four major powers whose interests depend on a nuclear-free Korea. Engaging in arms race against those powers would only make the security environment worse. In other words, nuclear weapons cannot guarantee our security.

It's time to put an end to this age-old dilemma with a creative and proactive alternative. The alternative should involve neither being part of another nation's nuclear umbrella nor building our own nuclear weapons. The alternative is making Northeast Asia a nuclear-free zone with an ultimate goal of getting rid of all the nuclear weapons around the world as envisioned by the NPT.

In fact, the second North Korean nuclear crisis in the 21 century can be an opportunity to review and ponder upon our nuclear issues. The international community including the big powers around Korea demands that the Korean peninsula remain nuclear-free. It's time to think about how to achieve security assurance from nuclear-haves. It doesn't just apply to the Korean peninsula. It

is closely linked with the promotion of universal values to protect Northeast Asia and the world from nuclear threats. And the six-party talks are a good place to discuss it.

Making Northeast Asia a nuclear-free zone may sound like wishful thinking. But half of the world has already become nuclear-free areas. They include Latin American and the Caribbean (Tlateloco Treaty, 1967), the South Pacific region (Rarotonga Treaty, 1985), Southeast Asia (Bangkok Treaty, 1995) and Africa (Pelindaba Treaty, 1996). Of course, Northeast Asia isn't in the same situation with these regions. But there is no point in feeling overwhelmed about the present challenges, wasting an opportunity to end the nuclear dilemma on the Korean peninsula and promote security in Northeast Asia. With the advent of the 21 century, non-proliferation has become an important issue and the peninsula is at the heart of it. So if we propose creating a nuclear-free zone, we will be able to enlist support and cooperation from around the world in order to bring lasting peace to the peninsula.

There are also practical ways to make Northeast Asia a nuclear-free zone. Among six Northeast Asian nations, Japan, South Korea and North Korea are officially nuclear have-nots. These three nations can first reach an agreement to keep nuclear weapons from their territories. Then they can get assurance from nuclear powers such as the U.S., China and Russia that they will not threaten with nuclear weapons or use them against them. This will definitely be a positive step forward. Six-party talks and NPT in 2005 will be great opportunities to start debate on creating a nuclear-free zone.