

## **A New Era of Peace: Opportunities and Obstacles for East Asia - A South Korean Perspective<sup>1</sup> –**

**KIM Young Ho**

Professor, Korea National Defense University;  
Visiting Research Fellow, RSIS, Singapore

### **I. Introduction:**

Recently, despite a gloomy situation of global economic recession, the world political arena seems to have been in a mood of high hope and expectation for coming of a new era. Why? It is largely because of an election of Barak Hussein Obama as the President of United States. A change of incumbent political party in presidency of the United States generally entails changes of its foreign policy, and so subsequent changes of world affairs, too. It is, however, expected to bring about more changes this time because of the President Obama's conscious and enthusiastic campaign promise of the "change" and "renewal" of American leadership in tackling of world affairs as well as his ethnic background, socialization processes, and inspiring career.

Criticizing Bush Administration's ideologically-charged and unilateral foreign policy as the main source of drastic deterioration of the U.S. image and reputation around the globe, the President Obama has emphasized that he will choose a more prudent and multilateral course of foreign policy in order to restore a fallen American moral authority. In doing so, he

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has also made clear that his administration will listen and be more sensitive to the needs and demands of its allies and friends; engage adversaries actively with tough and direct diplomacy; and use armed forces if necessary, but more wisely do so.<sup>2</sup> In sum, he has proposed and promised to exercise a so-called, “smart power” foreign policy – skillful combination of hard and soft power.<sup>3</sup>

Then, what change can this renewal of American leadership and exercising of smart power bring about to the regional order of Northeast Asia? What are the opportunities that can be presented and produced by this new leadership and new thinking to enhance peace and stability in Northeast Asia? And what are the obstacles that may hinder in exploring and materializing such opportunities? These are questions that this paper attempts to tackle briefly.

## **II. The Opportunities**

The renewal of American leadership and its subsequent changes of foreign policy can provide three opportunities for the Northeast Asian security situations: (1) progress at the Six-party Talks, (2) alleviation of regional rivalry, and (3) enhancing development of regional cooperation mechanisms.

### **1. Progress at the Six-party Talks**

As noted earlier, one of the most anticipated changes with inauguration of the Obama administration was that it would put more priority on diplomacy. As confirmed in his

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<sup>2</sup> Barack Obama, “Renewing American Leadership,” *Foreign Affairs*, 86:4 (Jul/Aug 2007).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of smart power, see Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *CSIS Commission On Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2007).

inauguration address, the efforts will be extended even to its anniversaries and tyrant leaders of the world “if they are willing to unclench their fists.” This may sound mundane, but can have a significant implication for the recently-stalled Six-party negotiations on North Korean nuclear development issues.

In fact, the Bush administration’s insistence on a pre-condition of Pyongyang’s abandonment of nuclear programs first for further discussions of any compensation and also refusal to holding bilateral talks with Pyongyang had hindered progress of the Six-party Talks during the early two and a half years of the negotiations. It was only the Bush administration’s overdue change to a more flexible stance in the last two years of its second term that could save the Talks from a complete breakdown and produced at least some agreements. Therefore, the Obama administration’s more open and willing to talk with Pyongyang in any type of format(i.e., either bilateral or multilateral) and without any pre-condition can improve substantially a chance of overcoming the stalemate of the Talks and making subsequent progress.

Unfortunately, however, Pyongyang appears to misunderstand the Obama administration’s position, and so has taken actions in the opposite way. As the result, the situation is very worrisome now. Within the last two months, Pyongyang has tested a long-range rocket launch and also an underground nuclear detonation successively despite strong objections and warnings of the international community including all the other five members of Six-party Talks. Why has Pyongyang acted in such a violent way? It seems largely because of two factors. One is related to Pyongyang’s domestic political situation and the other is pertinent to its foreign policy strategy.

First, domestically, North Korea is reported to be in a process of father-to-son power succession, i.e., from Kim Jung Il to his youngest third son, Kim Jung Un. The process is said to have started earlier and proceeds faster than originally planned because of Kim Jung Il’s

seriously ailing health condition. It is also reported that these days Chairman Kim's poor health has made him delegate many of his policy-decisions except highly important ones to a small group of top-level officials, led by Chang Sung Taek, a party leader and husband of Kim Jung Il's younger sister. Under such a situation, it is speculated that Kim Jung Il would have to emphasize more on the "Military First" policy and listen to the military more in order to consolidate his and his son's power. As a result, the military is now assumed to have louder voices in the decision-making processes and consequently, Pyongyang's policy has become ever more hawkish and hard-liner.

The other major reason for Pyongyang's recent series of provocative actions is its earlier high expectation for the new Obama administration, and subsequent disappointment at the Obama administration's not-so-different position from the Bush administration. In fact, Pyongyang was holding a high hope when the President Obama took office. They thought, unlike the previous administration, the new administration would be more flexible and conciliatory, and so offer more concessions to them. However, for the first two months after its inauguration the Obama administration did not signal any drastic changes or suggest better proposals that Pyongyang had anticipated. Although it was mainly due to other more urgent agenda for the Obama administration to handle, Pyongyang did not wait longer and started to take provocative actions so as to draw Washington's more attention. But Washington's rather calm and imperturbable responses to Pyongyang's such provocative actions frustrated further Pyongyang, which then, led them to take more hostile and confrontational measures by following their trademark strategy, "brinkmanship."

It is very disappointing and unfortunate, however, that Pyongyang has misunderstood the Obama administration's policy stance on non-proliferation. Its method or format of negotiations may change. Its content or quantity of compensation for Pyongyang's giving up nuclear development programs can also change. But not the fundamental principles; they

have not been and cannot be compromised even by the new Obama administration. Pyongyang should have known that. Nevertheless, it is not late yet. If Pyongyang changes its strategy even now and returns either to the Six-party Talks or a bilateral talk with Washington, the situation can improve dramatically.

There are two things that North Korean leaders must bear in mind. First, Democrats in the U.S. felt betrayed when the second North Korean nuclear problems broke out in 2002 because they considered it as a breach of the deal that Pyongyang had made with them about eight years ago. Second, while President Obama is relatively young and less experienced in foreign policy, he has shown after his taking into office that he is sophisticated and skillful enough to handle subtle foreign issues well. Thus, Pyongyang must re-think hard about their goals and strategies. Perhaps, it can be their last chance for them to make a deal, an ever better one with the U.S.

## **2. Alleviation of Regional Rivalry**

As many notice, China and Japan are now contending one another as preeminent powers in East Asia for the first time in history.<sup>4</sup> While the hike of Japanese economy started to take a drastic downturn in the early 1990's, China started to accelerate its economic development and grew fast and steadily. By the late 1990's, Chinese economic power developed strong enough for others to discuss and forecast the "rise of China." Since then, the subject has been one of the hottest and most persistently-debating issues regarding the region and looks continuous to be so at least for a decade or so. On the other hand, Japanese economy also recovered and resurged after a decade of severe economic recession around the turn of the century. As a result, with beginning of the new millennium, the regional rivalry between two great powers -- China and Japan has formed in the Northeast Asia.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see Ellen L. Frost, et. al., "China's Rising Influence in Asia: Implications for U.S. Policy," *Strategic Forum*, No.231 (April 2008).

Fortunately, thus far there has been yet no overt hostile competition or confrontation between the two except a few occasions of diplomatic uneasiness and small bickering that have been caused by domestic incidences of both countries. This relative stability and peace between China and Japan has been possible mainly owing to their close economic ties and interdependence. Tacitly, however, both sides have been well aware of and keen to the power balance between one another. Especially, diplomatic and military aspects of each other's power growth have been carefully monitored and checked. While the processes of check and balance have not been a tit-for-tat style, nor directed to each other all the time; the rivalry between the two has become obvious since the mid-2000's.

A key factor that has accelerated and sometimes served as a cover for such check and balance between China and Japan was the presence and role of the United States in the region. It is already widely known that on the contrary to its name, Japan's Self-Defense Forces is formidable and Japanese military expenditure ranks as the third largest in the world. While there is a constitutional constraint, it does not look as an insurmountable stumbling block to increasing Japan's military power. In fact, Japan has continuously strengthened its military capabilities as part of modernizing its alliance relationship with the U.S. That is, by redefining the objective of the alliance as collective defense of the Asia-Pacific areas broader than just areas around Japan and, subsequent expanding of its part within the alliance, Japan has succeeded in advancing its military power.

On the other hand, China has also quietly modernized and increased its military capabilities as its economy grows swiftly and rapidly. It has also improved its diplomatic and military relationships with Russia and took leadership to form the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Although Beijing justifies all those advancements of its power with the logic of "just catching-up" or its intention of the "Peaceful Rise," its real goal should be to balance against the increased power and influence of Japan backed by the U.S.-Japan alliance in the

region.

While the Bush Administration maintained its relationship with China safe and stable, its policy in the region favored and prioritized Japan somewhat blatantly. Considering Japan's strategic importance and special relationship to the U.S. since the WWII, it may not be so surprising. Actually, the interests and needs are actually mutual, because the U.S. also considers strengthening of its alliance with Japan as one of the major measures to balance the rising China. But its palpable strengthening of the alliance in the context of China's rise connotes a potential danger because it can intensify Beijing's suspicion and provoke a competition of power balancing against one another.

Judging from policy proposals for the Obama administration from the liberal camp in the U.S., the Obama administration's foreign policy makers appear to recognize this potent regional dynamics and will pursue a more balanced policy in the region. Of course, the Administration will not interfere in frictions between China and Japan such keen and sensitive bi-lateral issues like history textbook, territorial disputes, and Yasukuni Shrine visit directly. And the Obama administration also will continue to consider the U.S.-Japan alliance as the primary pillar of its commitment to Asia-Pacific region. Nevertheless, it will be far more cautious in siding with Japan and in dealing with issues concerning Tibet or human rights situations in China. Therefore, the new administration's more prudent and balanced policy to the region will encourage more integration and cooperation rather than competition and confrontation between China and Japan.

### **3. Enhancing Development of Regional Cooperation Mechanisms**

Unlike the European order embracing multilateralism, bilateral relationship has been a dominant feature in Asia, especially Northeast Asia. With the end of the Cold War, however, demands and efforts to establish multilateral cooperation entities have been increased in the

region. As a result, entities like APEC, ARF, NEACD, and CSCAP have been created and expanded in their memberships and scope of activities to date. Although levels of institutionalization and cohesiveness are different from entity to entity, each of them has served well as a forum for raising awareness of shared problems, exchanging different views, and socializing and networking among members. Except holding regular meetings and raising issues, unfortunately, most of them have not yet produced fruitful achievements. There are several reasons for that, but one of the main ones is lack of a strong leadership, especially that of the U.S.

During the 1990's, however, President Clinton showed a considerable support for APEC and used it as a mechanism both for tying its country to the region and for advancing some of his policy agenda like trade liberalization. As a result, APEC received a big boost and, subsequently other regional multilateral cooperation efforts also drew much attention and participation.

The mood has changed drastically when the Bush administration took the office. Under the influence of neo-conservatives, the Bush administration did not hesitate to use armed forces over diplomacy. Emphasizing the unusual nature of the "Global War on Terror," the Administration justified unilateral and even preventive military actions. This emphasis on unilateralism led not just to ignore but also disdain many existing multilateral forums and institutions. In addition to a widely-cited event that the Secretary Condoleezza Rice skipped the ARF meeting in 2005 for the first time since its foundation in 1994, the Bush administration also attempted to dissolve NEACD(Northeast Asia Security Cooperation Dialogue -- a Track II regional security forum participated by U.S. Russia, Japan, ROK, DPRK, and China) by drying up its allocation of budget to the meetings.<sup>5</sup> Another

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<sup>5</sup> T. J. Pempel, "How Bush bungled Asia: militarism, economic indifference and unilateralism have weakened the United States across Asia," *Pacific Review*, 21:5 (December 2008).

controversy is the U.S.'s non-signing of Treaty of Amity and Cooperation(TAC), which is required for participating in the East Asia Summit(EAS).

Pointing to the Bush administration's unilateralism as the main cause of deterioration of American soft power across the world, the President Obama emphasizes his openness to listen to and seek advice from allies and partners. Recognizing the necessity of cooperation and consultation with other countries in coping with the present challenges and threats, he argues for synchronized efforts for common security. He also stresses the complementary nature of alliances and multilateral cooperation, and encourages effective combination of both.<sup>6</sup> This recognition of and emphasis on multilateral cooperation by Obama administration will increase the U.S. participation and leadership in the multilateral cooperation institutions in the region, which in turn, will stimulate other countries' seriousness about and participation in those institutions. Then, it will eventually enhance levels of institutionalization of existing institutions and encourage more multilateral cooperation for peace and prosperity of the region.

In addition, this Obama administration's attitude toward wider and more active cooperation with other countries will also enhance integration and divisions of labor among several security arrangements both de jure and de facto. Currently, there are formal alliances between ROK-U.S., Japan-U.S., and Australia-U.S. in the region; while there is also a triangular arrangement like U.S.-Australia-Japan. Furthermore, there are proposals for a triangular organization like ROK-U.S.-Japan, ROK-China-Japan, and U.S.-China-Japan. This means that there already exist enough ideational and institutional infrastructures. If a strong leadership is provided by the U.S., then a new and wider cooperation arrangement can be created during the Obama administration.

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<sup>6</sup> Barack Obama, "Renewing American Leadership," *Foreign Affairs*, 86:4 (Jul/Aug 2007).

### **III. The Obstacles**

In order to identify the obstructing elements on the road to peace and prosperity of Northeast Asia, we should understand first existing security threats in the region. There are largely five security challenges in the region and they have a multi-layered structure.

First, there is a lingering source of conflict from the Cold War period. Even though now the Cold War ended all the rest of the world, only in Northeast Asia it still continues. They are confrontations between South and North Korea and in Taiwan Strait. The nature of their conflict is both ideological and military. Because of their long and severe war experiences, their confrontations are emotionally-charged and so, far more difficult to be reconciled. Because of a long period of division and rule by separate governing regimes, their confrontations become similar as inter-state conflict even though their origins were civil wars. Because of their origins of conflict are rooted in the Cold War confrontation, the stakeholders include not just immediately confronting parties but also other states in the region.

Second, there is a source of threat that has been signified after 9/11 – development and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction(WMD) and their delivery system -- also exists in Northeast Asia. It is North Korean nuclear weapons and the medium and long range missiles development programs. While it was already once negotiated and settled in the early 1990's, it has become a salient issue once more since 2002 and more serious and dangerous recently. While North Korean nuclear weapons are not direct threat to the U.S. yet, due to U.S.'s hyper-concern about the threat from WMD after 9/11, it cannot be easily discarded or ignored. Because of both its global implication and regional consequence, it is difficult to find a compromised middle ground between the U.S. and North Korea. Even though the six countries that are on or around the Korean peninsula participating in the negotiations as

legitimate stakeholders now, the eventual solution will largely depend on decisions of North Korea and the U.S.

Third, there are potential sources of conflict that have originated through historical interactions among states in the region. They include growing nationalism, territorial disputes, and history distortion. Most countries in the Northeast Asia have been interacted each other intensely at least for the last 2,500 years. Due to such a long history of interactions, both good and bad historical memories toward one another exist. And also, certain stereo-typical images about each other prevail. Thus, the conflict of this kind is less related with power, but more with national pride or images. Because of its symbolic meanings and closer connections to collective identities of countries in the region, the public opinions and domestic political dynamics matter a lot and strongly influence the solution of these conflicts.

Fourth, so-called non-traditional or transnational threats also exist in the region. Largely they are threats from natural disaster, environmental destruction, and energy security. Due to its geography and climate, the region is vulnerable to many natural disasters – typhoons, earthquakes, floods, and severe droughts, etc. Because of rapid industrialization and economic development the environmental degradation in the region is very severe, too. Because of active and intense economic activities of countries in the region, the region's energy security is also extremely vulnerable. Unlike other sources of security challenge, however, this type of threat can be both a source of conflict and a source of cooperation at the same time.

Fifth, there is a source of conflict with the 19<sup>th</sup> century geopolitical characteristics – the regional politics of balance of power. It is mainly between the rising power of China and the resurging power of Japan. This conflict is closely linked to historical memories and it stems mainly from the mutual strategic suspicion. This conflict is not yet overtly developed and economic interdependence plays an importance stabilizing factor thus far. The U.S. role will

be influential in this conflict and the process and consequence of this conflict will be not just regional, but global as well.

In sum, there are five sources of conflict co-exist simultaneously. Among these sources of conflict, the first one is relatively stabilized currently. It is partly because of heavy economic interactions and interdependence and also partly because of the presence of the U.S. armed forces in the region. Accordingly, if provoked, this conflict might develop into a local warfare, but not likely to an all-out war. Due to emotional and ideational aspects, the third one is difficult to be resolved in short-run. The conflict, however, is highly likely to confine to diplomatic competitions. While it can be a seed of other more serious conflict, this security challenge will be managed through skillful diplomacy and prudent domestic political leaderships. The fourth one can be more intensified and critical as economic development accelerate. As noted above, however, this can serve as a source of cooperation rather than conflict. That is, close consultations and joint ventures among key economic powers in the region will help find ways to cope with such transnational threats. And then, the solution of such threats through collective efforts will promote further cooperation and coordination among countries in the region.

Currently, the most serious sources of conflict are the second and fifth ones. The second one, North Korean development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, is now more urgent, while the fifth one, the rivalry between China and Japan, takes longer time to be fully manifested. As noted earlier, the North Korean nuclear development issues are getting more difficult to resolve because of its deep and close inter-connection with North Korean domestic political instability. Moreover, the fact that not much reliable information on the inside conditions of North Korea is available makes the situation even worse. Thus, its solution should start with careful assessment of the situation and prudent calculation of strategies, and then, seek skillful implementation of pressure and persuasion. To date North

Koreans have been allowed to go too far both in their development of nuclear weapons and in their demand of rewards and compensation for its give-up of nuclear weapon development. This means for its solution, the other five parties of the Six-party Talks should be ready for providing more compensation at the end, while right now it requires a strongly-united and adamant response from all the five members of the Talks. And all levels and channels of diplomatic persuasion must be tried first, but some other options of pressure also may have to be prepared for just in case of diplomatic failure. Usually, North Korean's preferred strategy of brinkmanship assumes a "chicken game," in which two automobiles run toward each other. Pyongyang should be reminded this time, however, of the fact that it is not a chicken game anymore because their car is running against not just a single car, but more than five of tanks.

Regarding the fifth challenge, the rivalry between China and Japan, first of all, both countries' self-constraint and mutual sensitivity to one another will be essential. Without such self-imposed constraint and mutual respect, the deep-seated mutual suspicion cannot be easily dissolved. Then, the next step is to put forward more effort urging China, Japan, and the U.S. to join together in a new multilateral setting or a more strengthened, existing one. This method is different from both appeasement and containment. It is also different from accommodation and hedging. It is rather closer to a binding or integrating strategy.<sup>7</sup> It is a third way and will help not only monitoring each other through increasing transparency in the short-run, but also building mutual confidence through socialization and assimilation in the long-run. In doing so, of course, prudent and skillful diplomacy of three great powers must be assumed.

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<sup>7</sup> For an integration strategy, see Ralph A. Cossa, et. al., *The United States and the Asia-Pacific Region: Security Strategy for the Obama Administration*, (Pacific Forum & Center for a New American Security, 2009).

## **IV. Conclusion**

With a changed leadership of the United States and the new President's pledge to renewal of American leadership in the world, a high hope for a new era of peace and prosperity has grown recently throughout the world. To meet such a hope and expectation will not be an easy task, however, because it requires changes in perception and habitual behavior. Such changes usually take time and demand patience and endurance. High hope and expectations can be easily receded to far bigger disappointment and frustration. A new era cannot be opened by one person's or one nation's effort; it needs concerted and unified participation of all the countries.

As enumerated above, if the three opportunities are well-explored harmoniously, we could have witnessed formation of a new multilateral security forum that would grow out of the Six-party Talks. It would have become a setting to address and discuss not only North Korean nuclear issues but also a wider range of security concerns in the region. However, due to the recalcitrant resistance and provocative behavior of North Korea recently, we now have to wait more time to see such development.

Instead, a more pragmatic alternative for now is perhaps to explore a possibility of connecting and combining the existing bilateral and multilateral security arrangements and turning them into one comprehensive entity or at least organizing them under a single umbrella organization. In doing so, its consisting number of entities, a guiding grand design, or neat and efficient organizing may not be so important at the outset. What is important then is to identify both compatible entities that can be connected and strong connecting points that can hold such linkages.

More concretely, the process of such connection can be pursued in two ways. On the one hand, it can proceed as similar with the growth of FTA's because it will develop and enlarge

by proliferation and merge of different FTA's. One possible example is that U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances are merged into a new trilateral alliance. On the other hand, its process can apply and utilize a division of labor. It can attempt to connect entities that exist for different but complementary areas of security. A combination or linkage between ARF(security cooperation mechanism) and APEC(economic cooperation mechanism) could be one of such examples.

In sum, it is not easy to build a multilateral cooperative mechanism, especially in the security issue-area. Opportunity exists if there is will. Among many ways of exploring such opportunity, this paper suggests a more pragmatic, bottom-up, and inclusive approach of “open linkages.”