



2011 MUST BE MANAGED PEACEFULLY

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I was cautiously optimistic at the beginning of 2010, as the leaders of those countries with interests in the region were being urged to display the political decisiveness that would put the Korean peninsula back on the right path toward peace and stability. One year ago, I stressed that it was imperative, given the political atmosphere on the peninsula, that resolute actions be taken to shed the vestiges of the Cold War and establish lasting peace and security both on the peninsula and throughout the region. At that time, I wrote the following.

In the effort to accomplish Korean peninsular denuclearization, conclude a peace agreement, normalize US-DPRK relations, further develop inter-Korean relations, create a Northeast Asian regional cooperative security mechanism, and move forward with other central tasks of the post-Cold War process, 2010 will provide a golden opportunity for trilateral strategic resolve between North Korea, the United States, and South Korea. Given the domestic political atmosphere of the core interested countries and the coming political events, and taking into account last year's difficulties and the amassing of military power, if this year's opportunity is missed, there is a good chance that these core issues could once again become bogged down in the fog of uncertainty.¹

Over the last year, not one of the resolutions I called for came to fruition. They all fell on deaf ears. Six-Party Talks, which participants continue to keep afloat despite the lack of any significant dialogue, produced nothing to speak of,

¹ Su-hoon Lee, "Forward: 2010, A Decisive Year"(in Korean), *Korean Peninsular Focus*(IFES),No.5(Jan.- Feb. 2010),p.2.



and the North Korean denuclearization effort has only become more difficult. Inter-Korean relations have hit rock bottom. The tragic *Cheonan* incident in March and North Korea's artillery shelling of Yeonpeong Island in November were unprecedented. North Korea's armed aggression and South Korea's inadequate defensive posture combined to exacerbate conditions surrounding the peninsula. The uncertain peace between the two Koreas crumbled as the real possibility of war grew. The US-DPRK relationship also grew more confrontational. There was no movement toward a peace agreement or normalization of relations between Pyongyang and Washington. Almost every issue suffered setbacks over the last year.

As 2010 closes and 2011 opens, reports published by South Korean government think tanks tend to cast a pessimistic light over the peninsula. Some reports predict a third nuclear test by the North, while others explore all the likelihoods of military clashes around South Korea's five islands near the Northern Limit Line in the West Sea. Additionally, inter-Korean relations in the new year and the political climate on the Korean peninsula are not far from crisis.

What needs to be done?

I would summarize tasks for 2011 in the following way: First, political stability on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia must be the main goal of 2011. In order to accomplish this, the confrontational military tensions on the peninsula and the antagonistic atmosphere they create throughout the region must be eased. This will require decisive diplomatic energy. What we face now is not only the verge of disaster for Korea, but a lose-lose situation for all the regional actors with an interest in the Korean peninsula. The armed confrontation between the North and South must abate and a resolution to differences must be found through dialogue and cooperation. Crisis on the Korean peninsula would hamper regional stability, while a lack of coordination throughout the region only worsens inter-Korean relations, creating a vicious cycle that must be broken for everyone's sake.



Second, when we ask what we've gained from the hardline policy taken by the incumbent South Korean government toward North Korea, it is difficult to find any positive answer. The weaknesses of the conservative government's 'solid security' are a testament to that. The administration has prioritized denuclearization, but North Korean nuclear issues have only grown worse. The hardline policy toward North Korea has also complicated diplomacy toward others in Northeast Asia. This much is obvious in Seoul's strained relations with Beijing and Moscow. The South Korean government needs to adjust its strategy toward the North, and improve inter-Korean relations through dialogue and diplomacy.

Third, diplomatic and security experts in South Korea have emphasized the ROK-US military alliance. In light of South Korea's insufficient self-defense capability, the issue of how to move forward and strengthen the alliance with Washington has been prioritized, while relations with Pyongyang and Beijing have taken a back seat. Since Lee Myong -Bak took office in South Korea as the president strengthening the alliance has taken priority over maintaining a balanced relationship with China. A prudent look at regional geopolitics in Northeast Asia reveals that this is more of an ideological line than a practical measure. In light of the dynamic geopolitical transformation in Northeast Asia, one must question the validity of over-emphasizing a bilateral relationship with just one particular regional actor.

Fourth, ROK-PRC relations clash with these efforts to strengthen and deepen the ROK-US alliance. The Beijing foreign ministry spokesman made this bluntly clear during the visit of the South Korean President in 2008 for a summit. Even those experts who advocate for a stronger alliance call for an inclusive approach that includes both Washington and Beijing. The current administration has significantly damaged hard-won political trust between South Korea and China. The government in Seoul has upgraded the relationship from a 'comprehensive cooperative partnership' to a 'strategic cooperative relationship'. However, whether the dialogue and political cooperation that should accompany a "strategic" relationship is being pursued is questionable. Relations between Seoul and Beijing became visibly worse in the aftermath of the *Cnenan* incident. Both sides' perception of the other seemed to be entangled in a number of issues, and tensions between the two governments reverberated throughout society, as well. More than anything, there is a need to work toward building mutual understanding, respect, and trust. On that basis, South Korea and China can build a solid, cooperative relationship.

Fifth, there must be an effort to reconvene Six-Party Talks. These talks are the only venue that exists for multilateral discussions on the ongoing peace and stability concerns in Northeast Asia, beginning with those regarding the North Korean nuclear issue. The framework has been welcomed by diplomatic circles, yet the longer it remains unused, the more difficult it will be to revive the talks. With China playing the role of mediator, if Beijing reaches out to Pyongyang and convinces North Korea to return to the table with a new proposal, the United States and South Korea should be receptive. If Six-Party Talks become the reason progress on peninsular issues is postponed, how can denuclearization and other North Korean nuclear issues be approached? The South Korean administration needs to abandon hardline policies toward the North and put forth efforts to overcome the current confrontation.



The politics surrounding the Korean peninsula in 2011 will have significant impact on not only Korean but also Northeast Asian politics in 2012. In particular, inter-Korean relations cannot be separated from the 2012 presidential election and politics surrounding it. Furthermore, military tensions between the North and South are at a high-water mark, and there is a freeze in political relations. Therefore, it goes without saying that the two Koreas need to work to narrow their differences, but more than anything, there must be an effort to prioritize stability in the Korean peninsular political atmosphere.