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## Inter-Korean Relations: Prospects for 1997

### With Reference to the Realization of the Four Party Peace Talks

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Forty-six years after the outbreak of the Korean War, the Korean peninsula is still divided into the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Inter-Korean relations are still characterized by mutual distrust, animosity, lack of mutual cooperation and conflicting ideologies.

North Korea has persistently undermined the armistice regime. On May 24, 1994, North Korea established a "Representative Office of the DPRK People's Army at Panmunjom," which was intended to replace the Military Armistice Commission. On April 4, 1996, North Korea announced that it would not recognize its duties concerning maintenance and control in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and then demonstrated military force in Panmunjom on April 5-7, 1996.

In September 1996, the North Korean submarine infiltration incident produced the highest level of tensions on the Korean peninsula in the post-Cold War era. These unilateral acts have virtually abrogated the armistice agreement. The South Korean government has demanded Pyongyang's apology for the submarine incursion and has temporarily suspended its KEDO

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activities and inter-Korean economic cooperation.

South Korea's approach to peace regime building on the Korean peninsula is different from that of North Korea. South Korea wants to conclude a peace agreement with the North to replace the armistice agreement, because, in Seoul's view, the "real" parties to the armistice agreement are the two Koreas. Pyongyang has wanted to conclude a peace treaty with the United States to replace the armistice agreement. Thus, the four-party peace talks were jointly proposed by the US and the ROK governments to counter the North's approach to peace regime building. I firmly maintain that the four-party peace talks is the best approach to peace regime building on the Korean peninsula.

### Mutual Distrust as a Key Obstacle to the Peace Process

Deep-rooted inter-Korean distrust is the core source of South-North Korean political conflicts. The South and the North maintain a devil "mirror-image" of each other. No matter how sincere one side has been in its proposals, the other does not take them seriously, and simply dismisses them as propaganda. Mutual suspicion and distrust originate from the two incompatible political-social-economic systems. Kim Il-Sung's *juche* ideology is unacceptable to South Korean authorities. In the eyes of South Korean leaders, *juche* is a basic obstacle to the Korean unification process. Many South Korean people still consider North Korea a hostile enemy state.

Mutual animosity resulting from the Korean War (1950-53) will not easily go away. Under such hostile conditions, nothing can be achieved. Unless both sides make the utmost attempt to improve their hostile images and distrust, one cannot expect a sincere inter-Korean peacemaking process. The South can hardly accept North Korea's argument that the realization of Korean reunification through the North Korean confederation formula could solve this problem. How can South Korea accept North Korea's unification formula under conditions of mutual suspicion and

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distrust? Unless both sides change their attitudes toward each other, there will be no peacemaking process on the Korean peninsula. Thus, both sides should work hard to build mutual trust before they seriously discuss inter-Korean peace/unification procedures. It will take a long time for them to change their mindsets and misperceptions of each other.

With the end of the Cold War system, the two Koreas signed and effectuated the South-North Basic Agreement and the Joint Declaration of Denuclearization in 1992. The successful implementation of these documents will substantially contribute to the firm institutionalization of peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas. Nevertheless, there are still basic issues to be resolved between the South and the North in order to create favorable conditions for a durable peace on the Korean peninsula. One of these issues is the four party peace talks proposal.

### **The Four Party Peace Talks Proposal in April 1996**

On April 16, 1996, the ROK and US governments jointly proposed a four-party peace conference with North Korea and China, to discuss the issue of building a new peace regime on the Korean peninsula. The proposal called for holding a joint meeting of the four parties concerned—the two Koreas, China and the United States—“as soon as possible and without preconditions.” “The purpose would be to initiate a process aimed at achieving a permanent peace agreement,” and “this process also should address a wide range of tension reduction measures,” according to the Korea-US joint announcement.

Presidents Kim and Clinton agreed that “South and North Korea should take the lead in a renewed search for a permanent peace arrangement, and that separate negotiations between the United States and North Korea on peace-related issues cannot be considered.” Thus, the two Presidents confirmed the basic principle that peace regime building on the Korean peninsula is the main task of the South and North Korean people. This joint peace talks proposal was intended to counter North Korea’s drive for a peace treaty between the United States and North Korea.

## Problems with Ambiguities in the Joint Announcement

The US and South Korean governments intended to make the eight-point Korea-US joint announcement creatively ambiguous, so that China and North Korea would affirmatively respond to the initiative. But the eight-point joint announcement seemed to be excessively ambiguous and confusing to the North Koreans. Thus, some ambiguities need to be clarified for a productive four-party peace conference. First, what is the key agenda to be discussed at the four-party conference? The key agenda must be the issue of peace regime building on the Korean peninsula. The four parties should discuss a peace arrangement—either bilateral or multilateral—to replace the current Korean armistice agreement which has been nullified by North Korea.

Second, item four of the Korea-US joint announcement prohibits separate negotiations between North Korea and the US on “peace-related issues” on the Korean peninsula. What are peace-related issues? If the term is broadly defined, the pending issues between the US and North Korea such as the missile talks and liaison office talks may belong to this category of peace-related issues. Therefore, peace-related issues need to be defined in a narrow sense and must be limited to only the issue of peace regime building. President Clinton made it very clear that there would be no direct US-North Korea talks concerning the armistice agreement.

Third, Presidents Clinton and Kim agreed that “South and North Korea should take the lead in a renewed search for a permanent peace arrangement.” What does this mean? South Korea’s interpretation of this is the 2 (South/North Korea) + 2 (US/China) formula. The 2+2 formula is the South Korean approach to a peace regime on the Korean peninsula, i.e., there should be a peace treaty between the two Koreas first, and later the United States and China should guarantee the inter-Korean peace treaty. This formula has been rejected by North Korea. Has the US government endorsed a 2+2 formula in the framework of the four-

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party peace talks? These ambiguities in the joint announcement will create conflicting interpretations among the four parties concerned. Thus, in my view, agenda items to be discussed at the four-party talks should be clearly put forward by South Korea and the United States before the talks begin.

Despite these weaknesses in the peace talks proposal, it is very timely and significant. Let us now turn to the significance of the proposal.

### **The Significance of the Four-Party Peace Conference Proposal**

The four-party talks proposal provides several significant policy changes in US/South Korea policy toward North Korea. First, the South Korean government has long insisted that an improvement in inter-Korean relations should precede North Korea-US talks. But, the four-party peace talks proposal separates the four-party talks from North Korea-US bilateral talks on non-peace issues in order to improve North Korea-US relations. The US government can now engage in direct negotiations with North Korea on such issues as the remains of American soldiers, liaison office talks, missile exports, and trade/investment, etc. This means that the South Korean government has abandoned its linkage strategy. This also means that it has come to the conclusion that the issue of building a peace regime on the Korean peninsula needs to be resolved within the four-party peace framework.

Second, the four parties will decide the agenda and the format of the meeting at the peace conference table, where South and North Korea will express their own views on these issues. The interactions between the South and the North at the conference table will promote better understanding of each other's positions and provide an opportunity to remove misperceptions of each other.

Third, the four-party talks would be the best deal for North Korea, because (1) cross-recognition by the four

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powers would be achieved through the process of the four-party talks, (2) North Korea's survival would be guaranteed by the international community, (3) South Korea's positive economic assistance to the North would be promised, and (4) inter-Korean arms control would further reduce the burden of North Korea's defense expenditure which has ruined the North Korean economy. Thus, successful four-party talks will guarantee the survival of North Korea.

Fourth, the four-party talks can be an international forum to search for a comprehensive peace plan for the Korean peninsula. The talks can build a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula, which will contribute to peace and stability in Northeast Asia.

Will North Korea accept the four-party talks proposal? North Korea is still examining it, and it is not clear whether Pyongyang will accept it. North Korea's response to the proposal seemed to be slow because the North wanted to know whether US-North Korea bilateral talks dealing with a peace treaty between the two would be included in the forthcoming four-party talks. Thus, North Korea wanted the US government to fully explain the proposal. South Korea and the United States agreed to hold a joint briefing for North Korea.

Since North Korea clearly understood that there would be no North Korea-US bilateral talks about a peace treaty outside the framework of the four-party talks, Pyongyang will need more time to respond to the four-party peace talks proposal in a positive way. North Korea continues to use the four-way talks card in order to get more concessions from the US government.

In the meantime, in his August 15 National Liberation Day speech, President Kim Young-sam clearly stated, once again, that his government would offer economic aids and inter-Korean economic cooperation if North Korea accepted the four-party talks proposal. Kim gave reassurances that South Korea wants North Korea to remain stable, not to be isolated from the international community, and that it will not pursue unification by absorbing North Korea. He also put forward three concrete agenda items to be discussed at the four-party talks: (1) a permanent peace

mechanism on the Korean peninsula; (2) military confidence building and (3) inter-Korean economic cooperation. He stressed Seoul's willingness to provide what North Korea most wants now. He stated clearly that South Korea would help the North seek fundamental solutions to its chronic food shortages, allow South Korean businesses to expand investment in North Korea and permit South Koreans to make sightseeing trips to the North.

From the North Korean perspective, let us take a brief look at the problems of the proposed four-party talks. First of all, according to the ROK government, the four-party talks proposal is based on the principle of South and North Korea as key negotiators and the 2+2 formula within the framework of the four-party talks. The 2+2 formula, however, was rejected by North Korea in 1995. Nevertheless, if the South Korean government insists on the South-North Korean principle and the 2+2 formula, North Korea is unlikely to accept the proposal.

If, however, the US and South Korean governments indicate that a US-North Korea peace treaty may be discussed at the four-party talks, then, the chances are that North Korea may accept the proposal. Therefore, in my opinion, the four parties who are "real parties" to the armistice regime should participate in the four-party talks as equal negotiators to discuss peace regime building on the Korean peninsula.

### **Essential Conditions for the Realization of the Four-Party Peace Talks**

What is to be done to materialize the four-party talks and to build a peace regime on the Korean peninsula? Let us take a closer look at the essential conditions for building a new peace regime. Although the four-party talks is a means to build a peace regime on the Korean peninsula, the holding of the four-party talks will not necessarily contribute to peace regime building on the Korean peninsula. There should be the essential conditions for achieving the four-party talks and building a peace regime on the Korean peninsula. If these conditions exist, the four-party peace talks will likely be realized in 1997.

First, the Korean Armistice Agreement needs to be observed and abided by the parties concerned—the two Koreas, the United States and China—until a new peace regime is established. South and North Korea were the two “real” parties to the Korean Armistice Agreement. However, the key problem is that North Korea does not recognize South Korea as a party to the Armistice Agreement. This non-recognition has been the key obstacle to the peace process. Thus, the North needs to change its perception of the real parties involved.

Second, the two Koreas need to accept a comprehensive framework for peace on the Korean peninsula. A peace formula should be acceptable to both Koreas. The North’s principle of a DPRK-US peace treaty and the South’s principle of a South-North peace agreement need to be compromised. One way of compromise between the South and the North will be to include these principles in a new comprehensive peace formula.

Third, South Korea needs to continue pursuing a policy of constructive engagement toward the North. The South should continue to play the role of a tug boat in helping the economically-bankrupt ship of North Korea.

Fourth, North Korea needs to stop its military provocations against the South and behave in good faith in order to build mutual confidence.

Fifth, the issue of peace regime building on the Korean peninsula is an inter-Korean and international one. The UNC, North Korea, and China were signatories to the Korean Armistice Agreement. The UN and China need to play active roles in transforming the armistice agreement into a peace regime. Therefore, a multilateral forum is needed to discuss the issue under the leadership of the Secretary-General of the United Nations and/or the UN Security Council, of which South Korea is a non-permanent member. The peace treaty which will replace the armistice agreement needs to be multilateral in nature and to include international guarantees. Thus, in my opinion, a four-party joint declaration on peace on the Korean peninsula is desirable for building a peace

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### **Concluding Remarks**

The two Koreas need to pursue a policy of pragmatism rather than a hardline policy to improve inter-Korean relations in the coming years. Above all, they need to implement a declaration of non-aggression between the South and the North along with other provisions in the basic agreement in order to build up mutual confidence, and to take into serious consideration the reduction of inter-Korean armed forces to a level of reasonable sufficiency. The two Koreas must work together to create the essential conditions for building a peace regime on the Korean peninsula. It is my firm belief that when the South Korean government takes the initiative to deal with the Korean dilemma in a more creative way, the Korean problem will eventually be resolved by Koreans themselves.

In the final analysis, in 1997, I am pessimistic about the short-term future of inter-Korean relations. However, I am cautiously optimistic about the long-term relations between the two Koreas if they are willing to make mutual concessions and to work together to establish a durable peace on the Korean peninsula. EKR