Nuclear Arms Control on and around the Korean Peninsula: Proposing an East Asian Peace Zone

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Chairman: Our next speaker is Taewoo Kim. He received his Ph.D in Political Science from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1989. Since then he has worked as a specialist on nuclear affairs. Currently, he is a Senior Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses. Taewoo, you have the floor.

Taewoo Kim: Thank you very much. As the only political scientist here, I will be raising some unique issues for discussion.

The first topic is the bilateral inspection approach, which we are very much focused on as a means to get North Korea to abide by the Agreed Framework, which has become the basis of the nonproliferation regime on the Korean peninsula. I have no particular demur in this respect.

Another topic I want to raise is a political one: if the nonproliferation regime is faulty or problematic, would we still argue that we have a regime? Would we still argue that, since South Korea is abiding by the nonproliferation regime, then all we need is to make North Korea abide by it?

In this regard, I would like to point out the difference between the Latin American setting and the Korean one. Brazil and Argentina operated their nuclear facilities while simultaneously talking to each other about bilateral inspections. They are operating and producing what they want to produce. In contrast, South Korea is prohibited from doing certain things. The nonproliferation regime discriminates against South Korea by prohibiting the nation from operating enrichment and reprocessing facilities. This is not only a technical issue; it is also a political one. Without considering all of these issues, the existing Agreed Framework system is not sustainable.

If the scope of this seminar is strictly limited to nuclear confidence-building measures (CBMs) between the two Koreas, then my second topic may be irrelevant. But if this seminar also is interested in finding a permanent nuclear solution on the Korean peninsula, then what I am saying should be quite relevant.

I would argue that the nuclear problem on the Korean peninsula and the Agreed Framework is analogous to a cancer patient. The patient needs a surgical operation, but the doctors and nurses instead give him more medicine in order to prolong his survival for five or ten more years. However, the cancer is still there. Likewise, the structural problems in the Korean nonproliferation regime cannot be fixed with temporary solutions. Such quick fixes may keep the KEDO project on track, but in the end, the problems will resurface.

With this backdrop, I point out two tasks in my paper: First, how to keep the KEDO project on track as the immediate task, and second, how to achieve a sustainable nonproliferation framework for the Asian region. Dr. Song is more of an expert on the first task than I am, so I submit to him on these issues. But my main point is that the Agreed Framework is problematic.

In 1994, the United States rushed to get Pyongyang to sign the Agreed Framework. Why? I contend there were other nuclear politics going on at the time. One issue at the time was the pending NPT Review and Extension Conference in 1995. The non-nuclear countries were unsatisfied with the continued nuclear tests and their destruction of the environment. The NPT was in danger. It was the only period when the United States was weak diplomatically. If the United States could not resolve the North Korean problem safely, then the whole NPT system could be jeopardized. It was a serious situation in the eyes of a political scientist like me. That was the reason why the United States hastily rushed to Pyongyang. As a result, the United States and South Korea promised to construct two light-water reactors (LWRs) in North Korea.

Of course, personally I opposed the problematic Agreed Framework. But what's done is done. By mid-2001, South Korea and Japan have already spent over $600 million for the KEDO project. In the meantime, the Bush administration has started rethinking that project. The Bush administration is raising many questions about the agreement, such as the North Korean delay in full-scope safeguards, the absence of an electrical grid system in North Korea, and concerns about the safe operation of the reactors after they are built. These are not new issues; they were pointed out in 1994.

Some political leaders and technicians in Washington are mentioning an idea of replacing the LWRs with thermal stations. But, in my opinion, it is already too late to talk about revising the Agreed Framework. What was internationally agreed to should be abided by. I know that the delay of implementing full-scope safeguards in North Korea is becoming increasingly serious. Down the road this issue may cause us to rethink the continuation of the KEDO project, but now is not that time.

In South Korea, we are divided into liberals and conservatives on the North Korean problem and the KEDO program. Even to conservative scholars like me, to revise what was already agreed upon is not an easy job. It is a kind of hot potato, politically speaking. Revising the Agreed Framework can deteriorate both U.S.-North Korean relations and U.S.-South Korean relations. Inter-Korean relations will also sour. For these reasons, I hope that the United States will be serious when it deals with the revision of the Agreed Framework. Though I believe the United States is moving in the right path by requesting to North Korea substantial changes and verification of agreements. This has been my comment on the first topic—inter-Korean bilateral inspections.

For the second topic, I will try to sum up the problems of the current nonproliferation regime on the Korean peninsula. The regime is composed of the three agreements: the Non-Nuclearization Declaration of 1991, the inter-Korean Joint Denuclearization Declaration, and the Agreed Framework in 1994. Those are the instruments that form a nonproliferation regime on the Korean peninsula.

The first problem with the nonproliferation regime on the Korean peninsula is the discrimination between the Korean peninsula and its surrounding countries. The regime does not deal with any other countries in the region. It does not talk about nuclear weapons deployed in China, in Russian Siberia, or in any other place. It does not talk about Japanese nuclear facilities. The current regime only deals with the Korean peninsula. We should take note of that.

The second problem is the discrimination between the two Koreas, themselves. Even though North and South Korea agreed not to have reprocessing and enrichment via the Joint Declaration,

North Korea did not fully abide by this pledge. There were many attempts at deceit. Inconsistencies appeared between what North Korea reported and what the IAEA found.

There are many things that happened in North Korea that we don't know about. The system has successfully shackled South Korea but not North Korea, resulting in an imbalance between the two Koreas.

This kind of imbalance is not confined to the nuclear area. The missile issue is a good example. Under a 1979 ROK-U.S. agreement, South Korea is prohibited from developing missiles with a range greater than 180 kilometers. During that time, North Korea became a great missile power. In 1998, it tested a long-range missile that flew over 6,000 kilometers. Such strategic imbalance, created by the nonproliferation regime, still exists.

Third, the current regime evokes inequality between South Korea and Japan. Japan now boasts a sophisticated atomic industry with advanced enrichment, reprocessing, fast-breeder reactors and other nuclear-related equipment. The facilities in Aomori Prefecture are extremely advanced. There are no restrictions on Japan's facilities. By this, I am not saying that Japan's nuclear transparency is problematic. What I am saying is that there is imbalance between the two countries.

As you know, reprocessing is a welcomed technology. It is a very peaceful technology. It could be very useful in South Korea's nuclear development. Without reprocessing, how can South Korea dispose of its spent fuel? How can we research advanced fuel-cycle technologies? South Korea is the only country facing this discrimination. How can we talk about the Agreed Framework without acknowledging this discrimination?

Fourth, the banning of reprocessing and enrichment technology on South Korea inflicts enormous economic and technological losses. It is an economical as well as a technological loss for South Korea.

Fifth, the discriminatory nature of the regime has hampered rather than facilitated inter-Korean dialogue. In the early to mid-1990s, North Korea tried to communicate directly with the United States, while isolating South Korea. By rendering South Korea void of any effective leverage vis-à-vis the North, North Korea had no strong motive to engage the South. This was frustrating for South Korea, which had to delegate its own destiny to the negotiation table of the United States and North Korea. But the nonproliferation regime that the United States negotiated included double standards. While it encourages inter-Korean dialogue, the regime also discriminates against South Korea.

When the Agreed Framework was signed between North Korea and the United States, and when KEDO was subsequently created, South Korea was not a member. Only after South Korea promised to pay money—70 percent of the project—could it play an important role in KEDO. North Korea balked because South Korea was going to provide "Korean standard" reactors. This impoliteness was really frustrating. It took two painful years to work out those details. But the outcome is a nonproliferation regime that is not sustainable. If a regime demands a unilateral sacrifice from a specific country, then it cannot last permanently. In that sense, some longer-term rethinking of the nonproliferation regime should be inevitable.

In my paper I also included some discussions on the politics over nuclear-weapons-free zones (NWFZs). On the Korean peninsula, a NWFZ is not that easy, so I am proposing a multilateral peace zone called the East Asian Peace Zone (EAPZ). This proposal may sound far-fetched unless it is considered—from a long-term perspective—as a permanent nuclear solution that satisfies every concerned country. It would deal with not only nuclear weapons, but also all kinds of weapons of mass destruction. This would include chemical and biological weapons, since both Koreas have the capability to produce these weapons.

For more details, please read my paper. Here, I would just like to introduce key conditions the proposed peace zone should satisfy:

- The first condition concerns geographical coverage. The zone should cover all land and sea in the circular zone within a 2,000-kilometer radius from Panmunjom at the center. The zone agreement should specify the prohibition of all kinds of weapons of mass destruction—including nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. Missile controls should also be modified since North Korea is now the sixth-largest missile power. South Korean missiles have already been effectively contained. This kind of imbalance simply cannot continue; there should be a new arrangement for balanced missile forces between the two Koreas, as well as among neighboring countries, while missile range limits are applied to participating countries. For example, the same range limit should be applied to at least the two Koreas and Japan.

- Another condition of the zone should be control of poisonous wastes. The disposal at sea of nuclear and other poisonous wastes should be banned. Disposal on the ground or emission into the air of such wastes must be carried out in accordance with the procedures to be established as part of the EAPZ treaty. Innocent passage through the zone should be allowed.

- An especially important condition is the non-discrimination and non-military use of nuclear energy. This area should be a nuclear-weapon-free zone, but when it comes to the peaceful use of atomic energy, there should be no discrimination. If discrimination continues, this system will not be sustainable, as I emphasized earlier.

- I also propose in my paper a multinational atomic cooperation organization: the establishment of ASIATOM (Asian Atomic Cooperation Organization), akin to EURATOM in Europe. This morning we talked about bilateral inspections, but I am suggesting a multilateral inspection by Asian countries as a mid-term objective. I believe this approach will be more effective eventually.

- Finally, this kind of system should be binding on the parties. South Korea has experienced a lot of frustration with North Korea. North Korea agrees to something and a few months later denies it did so. South Korea has suffered from this experience repeatedly. Thus, binding force is really important.

I emphasize again that what I'm saying may be considered not really relevant to topics related to bilateral inspection. But if we really want to find a permanent solution to the nuclear problems on the Korean peninsula, my ideas are relevant. I know that this proposal is currently not feasible because there is still distrust between the two Koreas, as well as lingering distrust between the Koreas and Japan. There is also an unequal balance of power among nations in the

region. This is not an easy job, but we should at least make others aware of the problems. We should establish a goal, no matter how infeasible it may be.

Thank you very much.

Participant: Why do you think what you are proposing is inconsistent with the bilateral approach?

Taewoo Kim: I'm not saying there is an inconsistency. All I am saying is that I know a bilateral solution is what we seek immediately here. But, still I want to let others be aware of what our longer-term objective should be.

Participant: I am clear on your main point. The immediate short-term goal is bilateral inspections. The longer-term goal is the multilateral approach. But I am puzzled and very saddened to hear what you said.

I participated on the American side in the negotiation of the Agreed Framework, both before and after it was signed. Apparently, you think that the United States completely bypassed South Korea and rushed the agreement to appease North Korea. I flatly deny this. Frankly, we had no problems coming up with the agreement with South Korea before going to the negotiation table with North Korea. Every aspect of the discussions we had with our South Korean counterparts was positive. They let Seoul know where they stood on issues, what the problems were, and what they wished would happen at the negotiation table.

Despite having little trust between each other, North Korea and the United States were able to talk about confidence building under this agreement. We didn't believe them at times, but we still came up with an agreement. That is how the Agreed Framework was made. Even though neither party liked or trusted each other, we tried to work out an agreement. We tried and we succeeded.

I agree that the Agreed Framework has loopholes and shortcomings, but for all the difficulties we face on this peninsula, the Agreed Framework has contributed significantly and has proved to be one of the most important pages of Korean history. I don't say these things simply because I was a part of the negotiations, I say them because of what the agreement has accomplished over time.

Taewoo Kim: I am not denying what the Agreed Framework achieved for peace on the Korean peninsula. That is why I do support the Agreed Framework. That is why I argue that the KEDO program should continue. I also understand that you should be proud of what you did for the birth of the Agreed Framework. But regarding ROK-U.S. cooperation over the U.S.-North Korea negotiation, what was officially reported in the newspapers might be different from how South Korean experts felt. For example, my analysis of the background of how the Agreed Framework was signed from the international, political point of view might be something technicians did not have in mind.

Participant: I'd like to make a small comment about the bilateral versus regional approach. I agree with the result of this discussion. A bilateral approach is easier, but in order to bring confidence to the two Koreas, as well as the whole region, a regional organization is better. We have to think about that. Of course, it is not our decision, but the decision of the two countries. If bilateral inspec-

tions can do something that international inspections cannot, then the Korean peninsula has a good argument for the bilateral approach.

Taewoo Kim: At my institute, the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, I spend time writing papers on topics like bilateral inspections. I know that bilateral inspections are important. But bilateral systems deal with only the two Koreas. They do not deal with the discrimination between the Korean peninsula and Japan and others. That is why, as a long-term objective, we should also mention ASIATOM or other multilateral systems.

Participant: Is it easier or more desirable to start with a bilateral scheme versus a multilateral one?

Taewoo Kim: Of course, a bilateral one is easier.

Participant: But the KEDO arrangement is multilateral. The Agreed Framework started out as a bilateral agreement between the United States and North Korea, but in order to implement it, they had to form KEDO, which is multilateral. If the North Korean nuclear issue could have been solved bilaterally between the two Koreas, then there would have been no need for KEDO or the Agreed Framework.

Ideally, the bilateral approach between two parties is less complicated. But with the North Korean nuclear issue, North and South Korea could not even sit down and talk to each other. That is why the multilateral system had to be brought in. It's not the best option, but it's the only way possible.

Taewoo Kim: So, whether a bilateral system is more desirable to begin with before heading towards a multilateral one is not a simple question. A multilateral system could focus not only on North Korean nuclear issues, but other issues in the region, like Japanese plutonium stockpiling, or Taiwanese nuclear issues. Inherently, a multilateral system is more difficult to begin with, because you have more parties to worry about—too many differences in opinion.

Participant: We just came from an eight-day tour of many Japanese nuclear sites involved in plutonium recycling or separation. Could Japan play a constructive role? Right now, I don't think that Japan and North Korea can solve their immediate differences. South Korea and Japan are also entering a period of increased tensions over the school textbook issue. I worry that changing the focus from a bilateral to a multilateral approach would be impossible to achieve right now because of the political climate.

While talking with the Japanese, we saw an awakening interest in security policy. We heard several times from people involved in the nuclear industry that they considered the nuclear industry to be only a domestic issue in the past. Increasingly, however, because of their involvement with plutonium, they are starting to understand the need to engage at the regional level on security issues. There is new energy and new resources that would be useful to explore. It would be nice to explore it more, particularly in the longer term.

Our position is very supportive of the idea of no-reprocessing/no-enrichment on the Korean peninsula. However, we also do not oppose the Japanese reprocessing and enrichment programs.

We toured the Japanese enrichment plant. It's a very big plant and their having trouble getting their centrifuges to work. They now have to restart their entire research and development program on centrifuges. It is not that my organization supports the Japanese enrichment program, but we don't oppose it either. We recognize that there is a two-tier world in this region.

We also observed on this trip that the delays that are going to happen in the use of plutonium are going to be much more substantial than we had thought before we went to Japan. We would hope that South Korea wouldn't embark on that path because of its expense. In this case, it would also be provocative to North Korea. It wouldn't serve any benefit based on what we are seeing in other countries.

Taewoo Kim: You are right. Right now, South Korea does not have a plan to do enrichment and reprocessing, and we do not oppose Japan's enrichment or reprocessing. But for long-term sustainability, we have to try to remove the discrimination. In addition, our discussion of multilateral versus bilateral should be an "A or B" discussion. We should have both systems in the long run. Right now we need a bilateral system more.

Participant: Multinational or multilateral systems are always subject to the problem that they won't work. For example, the IAEA has been working very well. But if you ask people how well the IAEA is functioning, many people could list some pros and cons. If you can solve the bilateral problem by a bilateral agreement, how could you solve a bilateral problem with a multilateral agreement? I have very serious doubts about this.

We have to define what the problem is. What is the North Korean nuclear problem? Is there a problem? When I look from a purely technical point of view, I don't see one. First, the nuclear program in North Korea is completely frozen. It is verified by the IAEA and so far the U.S. President has verified to Congress that the Agreed Framework has not been violated by North Korea. By definition, I don't think we have a problem with North Korea on this particular issue.

If you look at the big picture, we do have a problem. The reason we are here is to promote future cooperation. How do we make the agreement work better? There are many ways to do it, and that is what we need to discuss. We are not here to solve immediate problems. In that sense, if we do have a problem with the nuclear issues in North Korea, I'd like to hear what the problem is.

Taewoo Kim: I believe that it is wrong to assume that there is no nuclear problem in North Korea. Have you thought of past bomb-making, for example? There could be a nuclear bomb waiting to be assembled that North Korea may have produced before the beginning of inspections in 1992. The Agreed Framework does not deal with that.

Participant: I have been working on nuclear weapons for many years—how to make them, what tests are needed, and how to design them. If anybody asked me, "Is North Korea capable of making a nuclear weapon, if they have plutonium?" I would say no they don't have the capability. Why? Because they do not have the technology. The next question is: "Is there a technical problem rather than a political problem?" I have never heard that North Korea possessed a nuclear weapon or some variation, and technically I don't think it would work. According to my experience and my technical background, that is all I can say.

Taewoo Kim: How dangerous a North Korean bomb can be is a separate question here, depending on whether North Korea declares it or on how it plans to use the bomb. In the Korean setting, it can be very dangerous. South Korea may have to suffer from North Korea's version of an "ambiguity policy" or from more flagrant intimidation. That is why I ask whether or not you have thought of past bombs. In that regard I find that we have some differences of opinion between the political scientist and the technician.

A political scientist's view of nuclear weapons by a country can be boiled down to three criteria: "Do they have the motivation?" "Do they have the technical means?" and "Do they have nuclear facilities where weapons work is possible?" Those are the three criteria. In my judgment, North Korea satisfied all three criteria, perhaps before the 1990s.

Some technicians can argue that the North does not have the bomb since they didn't see it. That is the logic applicable to a courtroom. If there is no crime witnessed and no obvious evidence, the court should not return a guilty verdict. But the same logic applied to security can endanger the whole nation. Security requires worst-case scenarios. This is the way security policies are made. This is how political scientists should think.

Are we discussing security here? This is security logic. This is why we have to uncover and talk about these problems. If any technicians still argue that the agreement is perfect and perfectly effective, then I can raise many more questions.

Participant: As a technical person, there is no such word as "perfect." There is no such system in nature that is perfect.

Participant: I say this with full respect for a previous discussant. When we assess North Korea's program—and we do involve nuclear weapons scientists in our assessments—we can't exclude the possibility that North Korea is able to build nuclear weapons—an implosion nuclear device that may be deliverable—because the North Koreans have 20 years' experience, and they may have designed their program so that they never would require a full-scale nuclear test. We also don't know what kind of assistance they have received. Thus, we cannot exclude it.

The CIA says that North Korea is capable of building nuclear weapons. As you also know, the CIA doesn't have nuclear weapon scientists working there. They are drawing upon the labs, but the labs are conflicted on this issue. I do think that one can make a credible technical argument that North Korea can build an implosion system that could be deliverable, perhaps even on a Nodong missile. That would be stretching it, but still you can make that argument. Some of the arguments are based on what Iraq and South Africa did—how these countries developed their programs, their goals, what they sought, and what they determined as success.

Chairman: The weapons that South Africa developed are a completely different animal from what you are talking about—the implosion system. Nuclear weapons are a very complex animal. Thank you.

Participant: With that last comment, we'll close this session and move on to our next speaker.