

Notes on Strategy

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Woen-Sick Kim (Senior Research Fellow, INSS)

INSS

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY
국가안보전략연구원

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Along with the end of the Cold War, ‘The End of History’ was declared and the term ‘ideology’ became a relic of past history. The implications of democracy seemed obvious, and the global expansion of democracy and free markets was the predicted future. Under such circumstances, there was no reason for the Korean peninsula to be exempted from the Kantian peace plan that realizes peace with the expansion of democracy and free markets. Regarding the strategy for peace on the Korean peninsula, the progressives and conservatives in Korea have been pitted against each other. The progressives emphasized the free market, while the conservatives stressed democracy as the route towards peace. However, in fact, both approaches are based on a one-sided interpretation of Kant’s theory of peace. Kantian expectations for peace on the Korean peninsula through democratization ‘or’ marketization, or democratization ‘and’ marketization of North Korea seem to have operated as a common premise for the Korean peninsula peace strategy of both progressives and conservatives.

Regression and reflux of the Western democracy

The neoliberal globalization process was accelerated in the post-Cold War era which accompanied heightened

expectations for democratic expansion. Eastern European socialist states achieved marketization and democratization, while China succeeded in joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 amidst prospects for freedom and peace with market expansion. In 2003, the Iraq War was waged with the rationale of achieving Middle East peace through democratic diffusion.

However, neoliberal globalization accelerated economic and social polarization which brought about broken promises of democracy. The 2008 financial crisis and Brexit were emblematic in that they demonstrated the bottleneck situation of globalization. Dismay and disappointment regarding the broken promises of democracy led to the spread of extreme right-wing populism. The appearance of Trump on the political stage and his exit accompanied by the pillage of the U.S. Capitol laid bare to the whole world the true face of the U.S. that had boasted of its oldest democratic system. The expanding trend of democratic states has been reversed and cases of authoritarian regression are increasing in various parts of the world. According to the 2021 Freedom House survey, 36 out of 205 countries showed democratic decline regarding COVID-19. In his opening speech at the ‘Summit for Democracy,’ U.S. president Joe Biden quoted the Freedom House report and pointed out that global freedom experienced 15 consecutive years of backsliding. The spread of the internet has led to an overflow of false information and confirmation bias which has brought about a post-truth society. Also, polarization has propagated sentiments of hatred against others including immigrants, and minorities. The Iraq War that advocated

Middle East democratization merely prolonged chaos. The brutal scenes witnessed during the evacuation of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan along with the restoration of the Taliban regime displayed the futility of a democracy promotion strategy with democratic implantation.

Prospects for Chinese liberalization and democratization through market expansion are regarded as an illusion, and the rise of China has only intensified the U.S.-China competition for supremacy. China has taken a further step from its ideological restraints to advocate Chinese ‘socialist democracy’ as a new alternative to Western liberal democracy. According to China, Western liberal democracy which was founded on the one man one vote principle and multiple party competition is now faced with limitations of plutocracy and extreme polarization. The Biden administration which bases its domestic and foreign policies on democracy and human rights values seems to be challenged with democratic regression both at home and abroad.

Such Western democratic backsliding coupled with a rising China has revived ideological competition and aggravated the conflict of human rights issues and values. The declining need for U.S.-China strategic cooperation regarding security and economy in addition to the U.S.-China contest for supremacy has led to an increase in suppressed ideological conflicts of values. The U.S. and its main allies even defined China’s human rights violations against Uyghurs as ‘genocide’ and declared a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics. The decline of Western democracy and the rise of China will only continue to exacerbate such ideological competition and value conflicts.

Kantian approach to peace on the Korean peninsula

The Korean peninsula peace policies of the South Korean governments during the Cold War focused on a realistic approach to prevent the recurrence of war through overwhelming ‘superiority of power’ over North Korea. This approach emphasized that invasion attempts by North Korea could be prevented only through military superiority based on the ROK-US alliance. However, after former president Roh Tae-woo’s Northern Policy, the South Korean government in accordance to the world historical trend of the post-Cold War, took a step further from deterring war with superiority of power and applied the Kantian approach to establish peace on the Korean peninsula with inter-Korean negotiations and social and economic exchanges. In a sense, Kant’s idea of eternal peace through mutual respect among democracies, and expanded interdependence through markets began to operate as the premise for the Korean peninsula peace plan.

In accordance to such trends, the South Korean Government of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun strived to maintain peace by expanding market interdependence through the Sunshine Policy and engagement policy. Of course, such transitions in policies toward North Korea triggered ideological conflicts between progressives and conservatives in the domestic political scene. The conservative camp claimed that true peace on the Korean peninsula could only be established through democratization of the North Korean regime rather than commercial interdependence. Such a debate over priority

between free market and democracy, which form the basis of liberal peace, has continued as a longstanding argument.

Despite such differences and confrontations, it can be understood that the Korean peninsula peace policies suggested by the progressives and conservatives were both based on the Kantian premise of peace, with each camp emphasizing democratic polity or market expansion. Expectations existed for North Korea to ultimately make a transition towards marketization and democratization, and thus increase the prospects of peace on the Korean peninsula. Such premises and expectations reflected the global trend of democratization and market expansion after the Cold War. The spread of markets and democracies during the post-Cold War era would compel North Korea to accept marketization and democratization in the near future and ultimately lead to peace on the Korean peninsula.

Seeking a new premise for peace on the Korean peninsula

The present situation gives rise to an issue regarding the possibility of continued adherence to the Kantian approach for peace on the Korean peninsula. First, with the trend of democratic regression, it seems difficult to anticipate the democratization of North Korea in the near future. Despite concerns of the three-generation hereditary power succession, the current North Korean system under Kim, Jung Un is quite stable. It seems unlikely the democratic camp will repeat its already failed attempt at a coercive democratic expansion. In addition, the rise of China, which advocates socialist democracy, makes it all the more difficult to anticipate the democratization of North

Korea. Statistical studies on the rise and fall of autocracies also report that autocratic regimes with prolonged dictatorships and operative control parties and parliaments tend to gain more stability.

Also, under the current circumstances, changes in the North Korean regime resulting from marketization and also a Korean peninsula peace strategy based on increased economic interdependence do not seem easy to achieve. We could learn a lesson from the case of Chinese marketization, which led to confrontation rather than peace with the U.S. The marketization process of China has been analyzed by North Korea, which must have thoroughly educated itself on ways to utilize the market while maintaining its socialist system. Increased interdependency through marketization does not automatically entail peace, and marketization does not guarantee liberalization and democratization.

Of course, democratic regression and regurgitation do not entail the abandonment of Kant's imperative to establish peace. The establishment of a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula is a normative goal that cannot be surrendered by Koreans who have suffered the ravages of the Korean War. However, it seems that patience, control, and a new premise in accordance to the present state of democratic regression are necessary to plan a future where peace on the Korean peninsula can be realized. There is a need to reconsider hasty expectations regarding changes in the North Korean regime and also anticipations that inter-Korean exchanges and market interdependence will easily lead to peace on the Korean peninsula.

Amidst democratic decline and forecasts of a prolonged U.S.-China confrontation, the wisdom to handle long-term competition while coexisting with different regimes, rather than anticipating dramatic change from North Korea seems essential for a feasible Korean peninsula peace plan. A new approach to maintaining peace while acknowledging differences during continuous competition is necessary.

The political philosopher John Rawls wrote “The Law of Peoples” (1999) two centuries after Kant’s “Toward Perpetual Peace” (1795) was published. Unlike Kant, Rawls strived to prove that a state of peace in terms of international law was possible between democratic and undemocratic nations. He sought a way for peaceful coexistence between ‘liberal peoples’ and ‘decent peoples.’ Rawls asserted that with the absence of aggressive intentions and the guarantee of minimal human rights, peaceful coexistence according to international law was possible even with countries that did not accept the Western democratic system. In his own way, Rawls worked to enlighten the existing liberal thoughts.

Under the present circumstances, thoughtful consideration of an approach to North Korea aiming for long-term peaceful coexistence through competition while respecting differences seems necessary, rather than hasty expectations for changes in North Korea or unification. Of course, this does not entail that ‘we’ as liberalists and democrats can or must renounce our commitment and aspiration for the universal value of human rights and democracy.