

Sanctions Against North Korea or East Asian Security Cooperation?

Kang Man Gil

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by Kang Sang Jung

Are economic sanctions against North Korea inevitable? Even Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who is feeling the pressure of public opinion, indicated that he may consider doing so.

He made the remark during a news conference after meeting with South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun on Dec. 17. Until then, he had maintained a cautious stance on the issue.

Indeed, the Japanese people are exasperated at North Korea's irresponsible attitude in resolving this vexing problem.

But is it right to forge ahead and slap economic sanctions on North Korea? Before any action is taken, it is vital that timing and methodology be considered. But more importantly, Japan needs to look ahead and discern what it could lose by imposing economic sanctions.

Outlandish spiritualism

First, sanctions will not have the desired effect without the cooperation of China and South Korea. Second, they wouldn't really hurt North Korea because, just as a desperate Japan stood up against B29s with bamboo spears during the last days of World War II, it is stricken by outlandish spiritualism.

Rather, the North Korean leadership could use sanctions against Japan to tighten the nation from the inside and give momentum to its domestic "forces of resistance" opposing reform and liberation.

Third, sanctions could upset the six-party talks that are about to enter a crucial stage and give North Korea an ideal excuse to refuse to take part in the negotiations.

It is also possible that North Korea would demand that Japan be excluded from the process. If that happened, it could even cause the very framework of the six-party talks to fall apart. Even the United States, not to mention China, South Korea and Russia, is uneasy with the

Japanese argument for economic sanctions.

Just recently, James Kelly, U.S. assistant secretary of state who leads the U.S. delegation in the six-party talks over North Korea's nuclear standoff, made clear that the United States is aiming at achieving reform under the continued administration of Kim Jong Il. U.S. North Korean policy is about to shift from "regime change" to "regime transformation." If Japan rashly implements economic sanctions, it would lose the chance to be recognized as an excellent team player in the Northeast Asia region.

Let me repeat. When we think about the excruciating hardships that Japanese abductees were forced to put up with for decades, the way North Korea is responding by rubbing salt into the wound is utterly inexcusable. But what if economic sanctions are ineffective? In that event, what else can Japan do? If things turn from bad to worse and the North Korean regime is driven to the brink of collapse, a worst-case scenario could materialize.

Besides, even if the Kim regime is overthrown, it doesn't mean the end of North Korea as a state. It could even lead to the emergence of a puppet government of a bellicose military dictatorship. If that happened, it would be even harder to settle the abduction issue and the situation could develop into "hostilities" on the Korean Peninsula.

How can Japan resolve the abduction issue and secure peace in this region, including the Korean Peninsula, while avoiding catastrophic developments? This is the very question Japan now faces.

In order to find a solution to this difficult problem, Japan needs to firmly grasp the essence of the North Korean crisis and its background.

In dealing with North Korea, the U.S. administration under President George W. Bush has been promoting a hostile policy of containment up to now. The essence of the crisis lies in the deadlock between this hard-line U.S. policy and the North Korean diplomacy of brinkmanship that gives first priority to the nuclear deterrent. Behind the discord between the United States and North Korea is the aftereffect of the Korean War, which has yet to be overcome.

Traditionally, North Korea has regarded a pre-emptive nuclear strike by the United States as its greatest threat. To North Korea, which regards pre-emptive nuclear strikes by the United States as the biggest menace, the development of nuclear weapons and missiles is its strongest card to make up for what it lacks in national power and military strength. It is desperate to hold on to it as a bargaining chip.

We need to end this dangerous nuclear game and

pave the way to normalize diplomatic relations between the United States and North Korea by replacing the cease-fire with a peace accord.

With the United States softening its attitude, the six-party talks are about to form a consensus for a soft landing to encourage North Korea's regime transformation. The forum should be used to lay the groundwork to officially end the Korean War and conclude a peace accord, urge North Korea to give up its nuclear program, have the United States commit to a positive policy of engagement and reach an agreement to normalize U.S.-North Korea relations with multinational backing. If this scenario materializes, I am confident that the six-party talks will eventually develop into a Northeast Asian multilateral security framework.

Japan's Role as a Team Player

Such a development would mean the emergence of a regional security framework in Northeast Asia for the very first time. It would be parallel to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which embraces countries of both Eastern and Western blocs. Such a framework would make it possible to settle numerous conflicts that are dividing the region by politics and not war.

If Japan sticks to its role as a positive regional team player by making good use of the mutual trust between Japan and the United States, it can show that even Lilliputians of a peaceful nation

can bring back Gulliver (United States) who is inclined to rely on military power to a peaceful order.

Japan should strive to resolve its differences with North Korea in the broad context of building a comprehensive order of peace in Northeast Asia.

If a security mechanism is established in the region, the eventual organization of an East Asian security cooperation forum that loosely links Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia would no longer be a pipe dream. A summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in November in Vientiane agreed to hold an East Asian summit next summer, reflecting a vision of an "East Asian community."

Next year also marks the centennial of the signing of the Second Japan-Korea Agreement, which led to Japan's annexation of the Korean Peninsula. We must usher in an age to make East Asia one of the world's centers by putting an end to a century of dominance and submission and of oppression and distrust.

Kang Sang Jung contributed this comment to The Asahi Shimbun. (IHT/ Asahi: December 31,2004).

Kang Sang Jung is a University of Tokyo professor specializing in political thought and international relations. He is the author of Zainichi (Koreans in Japan) and the co-author of Senso-no Seiki-wo Koete

(Beyond the century of war).