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United States not without blame

It would be Koreans who would suffer all the calamities of war on the peninsula.

by Moon Chung-in

When I got together with American foreign affairs experts, the hottest topic was military tension on the Korean Peninsula. During a lecture at Columbia University in New York and a conference on Korea-U.S. relations at Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, they did not hesitate to hide their concerns over a possible war. Even those who had maintained a relatively calm perspective on North Korea expressed feelings of resignation, saying that no other option remains other than direct confrontation with North Korea. As both appeasement and sanctions have failed, they seem to think the time has come to prepare for a worst-case scenario and make a final decision.

I felt both unpleasant and concerned at the mention of a “final decision” so casually. It may be easier to mention a war from the other side of the Pacific, but it would be Koreans who would suffer all the calamities of war. Nevertheless, it is true that we have to take the worst-case scenario into account as U.S. nuclear submarine and strategic bombers were dispatched to the Korean Peninsula after North Korea declared a “state of war.”

How have things ended up here? Of course, the primary responsibility for that should be borne by North Korea as it is the one that created the chaos by relentlessly pursuing self-reliance and a military-first policy. However, the United States cannot be totally free of blame. If policy makers in Washington responded more wisely, the North Korean nuclear issue could have been concluded long ago. Therefore, we need to review the failures of the past to find a solution to the present conundrum.

Why did the United States fail to control North Korea? The first mistake was the U.S. government’s demonization tactics. All diplomacy needs a partner. If you don’t recognize the partner, you can hardly build trust, which inevitably leads to breakdown of negotiation. Regardless of the truth, if you define their leader as a “disgusting man,” their system as an “outpost of tyranny” and their state as an “axis of evil” and “a rogue nation,” talks are impossible. The Obama administration was not much different as it treated North Korea as a scallywag throwing a tantrum to get attention. From Pyongyang’s standpoint, it is incomprehensible to build trust - or reach an agreement - with America. That amplifies the cycle of distrust and rupture.

Second, the trap of “group thinking” also contributed to Washington’s failed North Korean policy. One of the necessary virtues to analyze another country and establish an effective foreign

and security policy is a willingness to embrace various views by excluding standardized thinking. However, a pattern of sclerotic group thinking dominated the policy making process in Washington. Some said, “The essence of the North Korean nuclear issue is the nature of its regime, and North Korea would never abandon its nuclear program.” Others said, “Based on the principle of crime and punishment, strong retaliation is the only option.” Or, “There will be no peaceful system or normalization of relationship without denuclearization first.” As hardline views became the mainstream in Washington, other opinions or counterarguments lost footing.

Eventually, regional specialists who believed that alternate options could be found by looking into what North Korea thinks were pushed to the periphery. Instead, foreign policy specialists with little knowledge of North Korea and experts in weapons of mass destruction raised their voices and shaped public opinion. In the end, this half-baked solution only aggravated the situation.

Last, the most crucial problem was the priority of policies. In the last two decades, the U.S. government packaged the nuclear issue as if it were one of the country’s major concerns, but actually it was pushed down lower on the priority list. The Clinton administration made the North Korean nuclear issue a top priority as evidenced by its attempt to launch a precision attack on the Yongbyon nuclear facility in May 1994. However, as the Geneva Agreement was signed in October, the plan was postponed.

Similarly, the Bush administration drew the “red line” and was eager to take immediate military action after the North’s highly enriched uranium program was revealed in October 2002. But after the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Washington’s North Korean policy focused on containing the status quo. The Obama administration also focused on Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran, with the North Korean issue being filed away under the plausible - and a bit ambiguous - name of “strategic patience.”

Now, the United States needs to be more modest and honest. Anyone can criticize an evil as being an evil. However, instead of blaming Pyongyang, Washington should also look back on its policy miscues. America is not flawless. Self-retrospection would offer a clue to the current dilemma. Washington can take the advice of former Prime Minister Lee Hong-koo, who said North Korea is “not a suicidal system that shuts the door to negotiations needed for its survival.” This comes from one of the citizens of South Korea, who do not want a war in any case.

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