Candlelight Revolution, South Korean Democracy and Changes in the Peninsula

PAIK Nak-chung

1. Opening remarks

1) It takes no expert (which I am not) nor a recent visitor to North Korea (which I had the great fortune to be) to note that great changes are occurring in the Korean peninsula. After seventy years of division and enmity, the two Koreas have entered an arguably irreversible course of reconciliation. In the wake of that process the first ever US-North Korea summit took place last June and the second one looms in sight.

2) My argument is that South Korea’s ‘candlelight revolution’, which began with massive nationwide demonstrations of 2016-17, provides the chief motor force (albeit not the only force) in the whole process. Thus, I shall first try to explain why and in what sense this ‘candlelight revolution’ does add up to a revolution. The task entails an understanding of what I have termed the peninsula’s ‘division system’ formed after the Korean War of 1950-53 and persisting to this day.

3) I shall next address the implications of this reality for South Korean democracy and inter-Korean relations, and the possibilities for change in South Korea, the entire peninsula, and the world-system itself that are opened up through the weakening of the division system.

4) Finally, I shall return to the current situation, including the question of denuclearization and the roles demanded of the major actors.
2. The candlelight revolution

1) Although the term by now has a wide currency in South Korea, relatively few people seriously weigh the point that the events so named diverge in many aspects from the textbook notion of revolution. Scholars who do address it come up more often than not with a negative verdict. They note the lack of any foundational violence, reliance on existing constitutional and legal machinery to oust the old regime and bring in the new, resort to no obviously revolutionary measures by the new government, etc. Hence the candlelight demonstrations and their aftermath are characterized as a restoration and reactivation of the existing constitutional order rather than a genuine revolution.

2) Such analysis disregards the *sui generis* nature of the division system and its reliance on what I have called a ‘hidden constitution’ delimiting from the very beginning of the Republic in 1948 the rule of law and efficacy of the constitution. What the candlelight revolution accomplished was not a reactivation but *activation for the first time* of the democratic constitution of the ‘1987 regime’, a change from a country where the constitution was not observed to one that will observe it.

3) Two further points: (i) the candlelight revolution from 2016 on represents an advance on the previous civic revolution (of 1987), thus representing a different order of achievement from the overthrow, peaceful or otherwise, of a repressive regime for the first time; (ii) this achievement needs also to be seen in the global context of ‘classic’ revolutions proving increasingly difficult to come by, while violent suppression of popular uprisings becomes increasingly burdensome even to dictatorial regimes on account of general advance in human rights consciousness and technological developments facilitating communication and dissemination of information across national borders.

3. South Korean democracy

1) Dictatorships in North and South were major pillars of the division system,
together with the Cold War and U.S. hegemony in the world-system. When in 1987 democratization began in the South and the East-West Cold War ended soon after, the division system went into a crisis and has never recovered its stability. Heightened tension in the past decade only signified a more unstable and extremely dangerous phase of the division system in crisis.

2) The ’87 regime, however, only shook the division system without managing to overcome it; hence, the vacillations and vicissitudes in South Korea’s progress in democracy, which was largely interrupted and reversed under Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye regimes. It was in keeping with the nature of the division system that retreat in democracy and deterioration of inter-Korean relations turned out mutually reinforcing.

3) Reconciliation with North Korea was not among the most salient issues in the candlelight demonstrations. But peace as well as justice did represent the fervent wishes of the crowd, and by decisively weakening (though not yet finally abrogating) the hidden constitution the candlelight citizens opened the way for the overcoming of the division system.

4. Changes in the peninsula

1) It is my conviction that, after the Panmunjom Declaration by Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong Un in April 2018, the June 12 US-North Korea summit in Singapore, and the September Pyongyang Declaration at the third and latest summit meeting between the two Korean leaders, movement for peace in the Korean peninsula has acquired an irreversible momentum.

2) Most of mainstream press and pundit opinion in the US focus on North Korea’s denuclearization and generally express skepticism regarding Kim’s willingness to implement his promises. A number of desperate opposition politicians in South Korea eagerly join in the skepticism, despite more than 80 percent approval rating for the Pyongyang Declaration among South Korean people and despite even President Trump’s favorable response. But such negative views misunderstand North Korea’s national goal, misrepresent the contents of the
Declaration, and misgauge the momentum for peace and reconciliation already in operation.

3) The momentum is so powerful because its prime motor force derives from South Korea’s on-going candlelight revolution. Recent developments demonstrate that, for all the eagerness of President Trump’s for dramatic accomplishment and the decision by Chairman Kim and his regime to focus on economic development at the expense of its nuclear capability, there is not enough leverage either in the US or North Korea to bring off a mutually acceptable deal without South Korea’s mediation and proactive measures for inter-Korean reconciliation.

4) Indeed, whatever security guarantees the US can and will provide North Korea in exchange for denuclearization won’t be sufficient without a concurrent process of building a closer political arrangement between the two Koreas—not reunification nor, in the short run, even a confederation, but more than just peaceful coexistence. For if the US should in future choose to return to a hostile policy toward North Korea, no nation in the world would be strong enough to circumvent it. But a North Korea formally associated with America’s ally South Korea will be a different story. Moreover such inter-Korea association—I’ve called for an ‘Association of Korean States’ as the first stage of peninsular reintegration—will allay another major security concern of the Pyongyang regime: the threatening and destabilizing effect of South Korea’s very presence. Again, the leverage toward such an innovative inter-Korea association is likely to come only from the South.

5) This in turn indicates that President Moon needs to sustain popular support within South Korea, where (as in most democracies) bread and butter issues play a prominent role among the electorate. Some supporters of inter-Korean reconciliation fear that the process may be derailed precisely by the government’s failures on the domestic front. I share that concern, but again I submit that under the division system one should always see the domestic and inter-Korean fronts as essentially a single one. The opening to the North will in
time bring economic dividends to the South, and progress in domestic reform will ensure that those dividends will not be monopolized by the already super-rich.

6) The drastic weakening and eventual dismantling of Korea’s division system will further diminish America’s global hegemony. As Bruce Cumings has maintained over the years, the Korean War was a more important war than Vietnam because it turned the US into a country able and committed to conduct the Cold War. The final end of cold war confrontation in the Korean peninsula will signify a corresponding blow, much larger than the defeat in Vietnam War.

7) Trump’s critics will thus find another instance of his irresponsibility and errancy in the rapprochement with North Korea. I shall eschew a judgment on his personal qualities, but I would remark that his positive role in the Korean question seems quite in keeping with his destructive work on many of the multilateral mechanism for US hegemony that the American elite worked so hard for more than a half-century to build and sustain. That mechanism, though still bringing munificent rewards to the elite, is neither sustainable in the long run nor beneficial in the short run to ordinary Americans. Thus, what looks like his selling America’s birthright for a mess of pottage may in fact have a deeper sense. He represents, however misguidedly, the legitimate rage of the American people at a global order that has become unsustainable and inimical even to the country’s own ordinary citizens. And if you come to think of it, domination and exploitation of the world isn’t anybody’s birthright, either.