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Why the Snowfall in April is Not So Bad After All



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In April, with cherry blossoms already fallen, snow is falling in the Korean peninsula. The word “snow” has many connotations. In the Korean peninsula, recurring crisis always rises in February and March during the period of ROK-US joint military exercises. There are growing rumors about the possibility of the US bombing North Korea, with even specific dates from fake news that go beyond the typical preemptive strike discussion. Obviously, it is not the real bombs but “word bombs” on the Korean peninsula from the possible military actions by the US. This is freezing up the Korean peninsula, far more than real snow.

That is not to say that the rumor has no basis. North Korea’s consistent provocations contributed as the fundamental cause for this rumor and the possibility of the United States to take military action was largely exaggerated. This is not intended to raise suspicions that someone is using the security frame for the upcoming presidential election in South Korea. Nonetheless, if we consider whether both the US and North Korea recognize South Korean political situation as a major factor in counter military actions, this leads to the conclusion that this is closer to a conspiracy theory. Unfortunately, this situation is in fact a case of “Korea passing.”

It is natural to consider a military response, even a preemptive strike, in the context of the ongoing nuclear weapons and missiles development by North Korea. If in fact there is a clear sign of an actual attack by North Korea, a preemptive strike is inevitable. However, military action on a non-preventive basis is unrealistic in many respects. From the US perspective, this is not only about the evacuation of 300,000 Americans living in South Korea. It is impossible to destroy all the nuclear facilities and missiles in North Korea, and there is a huge threat of collusion against the capital region. The danger of irresponsible military action can disturb domestic stability as well as stability on the Korean peninsula and the region, and eventually jeopardize the US-ROK alliance.

Unlike the Obama administration, the Trump administration has made statements from early on that military options are on the table to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. It is just one of the many options that have just been put out—something that has been sitting in the back drawer for some time. It is not that high on the priority list. If we go ahead and amplify the North Korean military action as a high priority scenario, this in fact can give the wrong signal to North Korea and create a confusing situation for the United States.

Shortly before the April meeting between China and the United States, President Trump said he would act independently if China did not act on the North Korean nuclear issue. While it was intended as a means to pressure China, this was construed as if the United States could conduct military action. Since the US missile strike on Syria, the routing of the US aircraft carrier the USS Carl Vinson on a course for the Korean peninsula was interpreted as a clear indication of a pending attack on North Korea. President Trump also sent a warning message to North Korea via SNS. However, this too was interpreted as pressure directed at China—rather than North Korea—to resolve the North Korean issue. Trump is not at leisure to deal with North Korea directly, and has not completed all the necessary preparations for his administration, including selection of relevant personnel.

The Trump administration has called the former Obama administration's policy of "strategic patience" a complete failure, and President Trump claimed that he will consider "all options." In other words, everything also means nothing. In principle, the Trump administration's policy toward the North Korean nuclear issue has been about "the highest pressure and intervention" but in fact this pressure is placed on China. China is also taking advantage of this situation and is exhibiting gestures that seem to put pressure on North Korea, while taking US pressure and demands into consideration. While it appears as though cooperation may be established between the US and China surrounding the North Korean nuclear issue, it is unlikely that a "big deal" will take place.

For the time being, the Trump administration is expected to prioritize domestic and economic issues that brought him success in the US election. The North Korean issue is likely to be tackled—whether through negotiation or dialogue—after the administration makes its preparations. That time could be around June or July, after appointments and policy for North Korea have been finalized and become more concrete. Until then, the United States is pressing with military pressure hoping that North Korea remains quiet with no further provocations. North Korea, however, is pressuring the US to come to the dialogue table. North Korea is trying to raise the priority of the nuclear issue on the US agenda, but the US is unaffected by this. This is resulting in heightened tension.

Any sports coach who is about to play an important game will not let his athletes sit idle just because the opposing team doesn't have its members ready. In the recent military parade on April 15, North Korea boasted various ballistic missiles. A new type of ICBM was also unveiled. On the very next day, North Korea fired a ballistic missile from Sinpo. This was the fifth missile launch of this year. This may be a message to express that North Korea will not give in to US military pressure, while regulating the level of provocation in consideration of the uncertainty of the Trump administration and preparing for a future game with the United States, including its negotiation card. If the game is started in any form between the US and North Korea in June or July, a successful test launch of an ICBM or failure is likely to create a different outcome for the two countries. North Korea and the United States are fighting a fierce battle to take the initiative by raising the initial stakes for negotiations. This is the reason why an untimely snow is falling in April on the Korean peninsula.

The year in which there is a heavy snowfall in the winter is likely to mean a bumper crop year. This heavy "snowfall" in late April is filled with apprehension and anticipation. If the current tension is a battle for the game between the United States and North Korea—a fight over seats or negotiation card—it is making the possibility for a game more likely rather than one side's unilateral dominance. The result of the game is unknown, but there is more hope than if there were no game.

What we really need to worry about is that all we can do right now is to wait for the US, North Korea, and China to harvest the autumn harvest they will bring. If South Korea does not start preparing now, it could really turn into "Korean passing" and nothing gained from the fall harvest.

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