



IFES Issues and Analysis - NO.73 [2018-02] Mar. 15, 2018

Eleven, Eighteen, and Sixty-five (Years) on the Korean Peninsula



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In 2018, it will be 65 years since the signing of the Korea War armistice. Events between March 5th and 9th, 2018 will be recorded not only on the Korean peninsula but in world history as notable events. South Korea's Moon Jae-in administration sent a special envoy to North Korea. The delegation met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on the day they arrived and agreed that an inter-Korean summit should be held in late April. Soon after the delegation's return to South Korea, members then flew to Washington, met with US President Donald Trump, and conveyed to him a message from Kim Jong Un, then told the world that President Trump had agreed to meet Kim Jong Un by the end of May. This marks the beginning of a new phase for inter-Korean relations. It was only late last year that the possibility of war was being discussed along with intensifying sanctions and pressure due to the accelerating North Korean nuclear and missile developments. It will take considerable time and effort to improve relations between the two Koreas, to achieve denuclearization on the Korean peninsula, and to construct a peace system, but the peninsula now certainly seems to find itself at the start of this long path.

The summit between the two Koreas scheduled for late April 2018 will be the first time such a summit has happened since 2007—11 years. The circumstances on the peninsula and the situations faced by the two states are very different from the way they were eleven years ago. Many events have occurred in the intervening time, with most exchanges between the two sides ceasing. Most of all, North Korea has achieved such developments with its nuclear weapons and missile programs as to feel confident enough to declare its 'nuclear potential' complete. North Korea proposed summits with the top leadership of the United States and South Korea whilst in possession of nuclear weapons and missiles. It intends to discuss the major issues that stand in the way of bringing peace to the Korean peninsula, namely, denuclearization, the security of the North Korean system, a peace treaty, etc. In addition, less is known about Kim Jong Un than Kim Jong Il. For this reason, close preparations and agreement between the United States and South Korea are needed.

The circumstances surrounding the peninsula are similar to those that led up to the inter-Korean summit of 2000, and the summit mooted between North Korea and the United States. June 2000 was the first time there has been a summit between the two Koreas, and it became the focus of efforts to move inter-Korean relations from being characterized by hostility and confrontation to dialogue and cooperation. Around four months after the summit, Director of the General Political Bureau of the (North) Korean People's Army, Cho Myong Rok, visited Washington D.C., met with then-US President Bill Clinton, while then-US Secretary of State Madeline Albright visited Pyongyang and met with then-North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. President Clinton had planned to visit the North and have a summit with Kim Jong Il in order to come to an agreement on North Korea ending its production of long-range missiles. Unlike 2000, the current situation on the Korean peninsula is the most pressing foreign policy issue facing the incumbent Donald Trump administration in the United States, a little over a year after President Trump took office. The Moon administration is also seeking to actively support the Trump administration's push to fundamentally resolve the issue.

Kim Jong Un's North Korea also well understands the need for a change in the mood on the

Korean peninsula. The North Korean government in the Kim Jong Un era has pursued a policy of 'dual development of the economy and nuclear weapons', and has focused on perfecting its nuclear potential. In the course of such efforts, sanctions and pressure from the international community, led by the United States, have intensified. The North has further cemented its image as a 'rogue state'. In addition, Kim Jong Un has revived the Party-State, has replaced prominent members of the elite, and thus created a system centered on his personage. These developments were largely confirmed in the Second Plenum of the Seventh Central Committee of the Workers Party of Korea held last October. On such a basis, Kim Jong Un has moved to seek North Korea's recognition as a normal state while also being recognized as the supreme leader of North Korea. And in order to realize such objectives, he took the highly unusual step of placing denuclearization on the agenda for discussions—with the proviso that the North Korean system is guaranteed security.

These two summits to be held consecutively this coming spring will be an important indicator of whether we are on the road to a peace system from the current armistice system of the previous 65 years. The major items on the agenda for the inter-Korean summit will be improving and developing relations, denuclearization of the peninsula, and creating a peace system, while the United States and North Korea will discuss a resolution to the problem of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and the issue of security guarantees for the North Korean regime. As President Moon's envoy to the North said, Kim Jong Un may make a more dramatic and unprecedented offer and attempt to make agreements with Presidents Moon and Trump than hitherto were thought possible. Kim will focus on the issue of regime security and the resolution of the other issue—that is, economic development. Economic issues may prove more important than political or military ones in the discussion.

It will be very difficult for all issues to be dealt with at these two summits—as the saying goes, 'You aren't full with the first mouthful'. Thus, there is a need for a new approach and transformation for the resolution of the fundamental problems arising from the armistice system. We must focus on what can be achieved. If a direction for resolution can be found, rapid progress is possible. The three countries must move beyond their own narrow interests and must try to understand the world from the perspective of the other. It would be best if they agree to a road map for peace on the Korean peninsula, and then subsequently seek actual resolution through gradual negotiation. Such a process must actively fully include China, Japan, and Russia. 'Beginning is half the battle', thus much progress on the path to peace has been made. As President Moon points out, if the situation on the Korean peninsula is handled with great patience, then peace may result far more quickly.

A historic inter-Korean summit will occur at the end of this April. There is a need to regularize such events in order to bring peace to the peninsula. To move beyond the current high pressure situation, discussions should focus on content not form. We face a key turning point in the making of the future of the Korean peninsula. We must do all we can to ensure that we make the most of this opportunity.

(Correction notice: the following essay has been reposted in light of syntactic and semantic discrepancies.)

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