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Considering the One Year Anniversary of the Pyonggyang Joint Declaration of September 2018
North and South Korea Must Adhere to Military Accords



Dong Yub KIM
Director of Research, IFES
donykim@kyungnam.ac.kr

In autumn of last year, the two Koreas succeeded in improving inter-Korean relations and making progress toward denuclearization with the signing of the Pyonggyang Joint Declaration of September 2018--a clear case of the two countries hitting two birds with one stone. For the first time, North and South Korea discussed specifics about how to achieve denuclearization through summit meetings between the two country's leaders, and included the specific agreements made during these talks in Article 5 of the declaration. Rather than bring about agreements between the two Koreas on denuclearization, the inter-Korean talks became the catalyst for the start of dialogue between the US-North Korea on denuclearization and clearly denoted South Korea's role as a mediator between the two countries. The two Koreas reached an historic point in their relationship where their agreements on military issues brought forth an irreversible era of peace. By bringing inter-Korean military issues out to the open instead of putting them on the backburner as in the past, North and South Korea decisively ended the era of military threats and the danger of war, and normalized peace in the lives of Koreans on both sides of the 38th Parallel. The April 27 Panmunjom Declaration and the September Pyonggyang Joint Declaration agreed to by leaders of the two Koreas should both be hailed as the most important achievements of the past year.

Right after President Moon Jae-in and Chairman Kim Jong Un signed the Pyonggyang Joint Declaration at the September 2018 inter-Korean summit in Pyonggyang, Defense Minister Song Yong-moo and People's Armed Forces Minister No Kwang-chul signed the agreement of the implementation of the historic Panmunjom Declaration in the military domain, also known as the "Comprehensive Military Agreement." This military agreement became the first article of the joint declaration and was also adopted as a separate agreement between the two Koreas. This was the first time that had happened in the history of the inter-Korean relationship. The focal point of the summit in Pyonggyang was not Article 5 concerning denuclearization, but Article 1, which focused on the military issues between the two Koreas. Placing a priority on agreement of military issues first was a paradigm shift in both the inter-Korean relationship and for achieving denuclearization and forging peace on the Korean Peninsula.

The two Koreas were courageous in their efforts to implement the agreements following the September Pyonggyang Joint Declaration. The highest achievement of North and South Korea was their implementation of practical measures through the military accords to prevent unintended clashes and to turn the demilitarized zone (DMZ) into a peace zone. Buffer zones were created on land and sea, and in the air, while confrontational actions on both sides were halted. Eleven guard posts (GPs) near the DMZ were demolished, and soldiers were disarmed in the joint security area (JSA) in Panmunjom. The two Koreas removed mines as part of joint efforts to uncover the remains of fallen soldiers, and roads between the two countries were connected that led to a famous scene of soldiers from both Koreas meeting each other. Concerns raised in some quarters that went beyond any rational concern for South Korea's security--such as criticism that South Korea's military was being "disarmed" or that the Moon government was "abandoning the nation's security"--were simply insults hurled at the South Korean military. In contrast to these professed concerns by some quarters of society, South Korea's defense policies have become more accountable and South Korea's military has become stronger.

The efforts by both Koreas to resolve bilateral military issues provides a firm basis to improve the inter-Korean relationship and establish both a peace system and achieve denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. These efforts also provide the key to linking improvement of the inter-Korean relationship with establishment of a peace system on the peninsula. While economic issues are also important, agreements on military issues between the two Koreas create a virtuous cycle that allows improvement in the inter-Korean relationship, the achievement of denuclearization and the development of the US-North Korean relationship under the Armistice Agreement system. Military-focused talks also provide the key to allow improvements in the inter-Korean relationship to bring about denuclearization, the establishment of the peace system and improvement in the US-North Korean relationship. There is no doubt that adherence to the Armistice Agreement system through active implementation of early-stage restrictions on military spending along with preemptive measures to prevent military clashes and reduce military tensions is an important step to ensure the realization of denuclearization and the establishment of the peace system.

That all being said, there are still many issues ahead of us to be resolved a year after the signing of the Pyongyang Joint Declaration. The promise the two Koreas made to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula continued to be honored until the second US-North Korean summit in Hanoi, Vietnam, but has yet to achieve any positive results. Full of expectations for the summit, North Korea appears very disappointed at the outcome of the Hanoi summit and now even inter-Korean relations have stagnated. North Korea conducted eight missile and rocket tests this summer with US-South Korean military exercises in the background. This may signal that prospects for peace have disappeared only to be replaced by fears of war. The reason we should not lose hope, despite memories of the skyrocketing of tensions on the Korean Peninsula due to North Korea's nuclear and missile tests in 2017, is because the military agreement made between the two Koreas is still alive and well.

The two Koreas must continue to adhere to the Comprehensive Military Agreement. Moreover, it is imperative that this military agreement be implemented regardless of progress on denuclearization and dialogue between the US and North Korea. An upgrade to the military agreement, which I will call "Comprehensive Military Agreement 2.0," must be agreed upon to provide a catalyst to further develop the now irreversible progress the two Koreas have made in resolving bilateral military issues unrelated to international sanctions, along with achieving denuclearization and establishing a peace system on the Korean Peninsula. This will require the rapid establishment and operation of an "Inter-Korean Military Joint Committee" to quickly implement bilateral agreements and normalize military issue-related talks between the two Koreas.

Future efforts aimed at resolving bilateral military issues need to be extracted from the framework of a military arms race between the two Koreas and approached from the perspective of institutionalizing peace on the Korean Peninsula. Up until this point, the roadblock to resolving bilateral military issues has not been the lack of plans. Rather, the two Koreas have suffered from a lack of political will to put these plans into action because of mutual distrust of the other side. To implement bilateral military agreements and expand agreements on restrictions of military expenditures, there is a need for proposals to be put forward that will be accepted by the other side as opposed to presenting the "latest and greatest" proposals based on political expediency. The need for these new kinds of proposals, of course, is true across the entire expanse of agreements made between the two Koreas. Ultimately, however, North Korea's failure to proactively participate in negotiations with South Korea is the biggest issue facing the resolution of military issues between the two Koreas. South Korea will thus need to make efforts to present proposals that will entice North Korea to participate in talks.

South Korean leaders have long believed that an effective method to bring North Korea to the table to discuss military issues is for South Korea to hold a strong military stance toward North Korea. This, the logic goes, would then force North Korean leaders to agree to discussions with South Korea aimed at reducing the military threat they perceive. It is clear, of course, the idea that negotiations must be conducted from a powerful position is key to bringing about successful

talks in reducing military expenditures. That being said, we need to rethink whether that idea will actually force North Korea to the bargaining table, provide South Korea with leadership in such talks or actually resolve bilateral military issues. We must think hard about how to “reset” the objectives of inter-Korean military talks to fit with changes in realities on the Korean Peninsula. As I mentioned before, military talks must be firmly connected with achieving denuclearization and establishing a peace system on the peninsula, along with linking them to South Korea’s defense policies and national strategy. These policies must be implemented in a frank and transparent manner given the need for a broad social consensus and consultations with the South Korean public.

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2(Samcheong-dong) Bukchon-ro 15-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul 110-230,
Republic of Korea
TEL. +82-2-3700-0739 FAX. +82-2-3700-0707
EMAIL. ifes@kyungnam.ac.kr