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Two Years after the Panmunjom Declaration, When Will the Two Koreas Move Toward Peace Again?



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

Two years have passed since the signing of the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration. The rays of spring sunshine were especially warm on the Korean Peninsula that year. Everyone, of course, knows that an autumn harvest follows the planting of seeds in the spring. The autumn harvest was particularly plentiful in 2018 -- as evidenced by the improvement in inter-Korean relations; however, the relationship between the two Koreas has since gone downhill. While the spread of COVID-19 is one reason for the lack of improvement in inter-Korean relations, there are other factors at play. When will the Korean Peninsula experience a move toward peace again?

Improving inter-Korean relations after the April 15 elections

South Korea's ruling party vanquished the opposition in the April 15 general elections. Many have pointed to the results of the elections as evidence that the inter-Korean relationship will improve. Needless to say, the election results will give a new energy to the South Korean government's efforts in implementing its policies toward North Korea, yet they may also throw up new roadblocks. Despite South Korea's denial of any issues with Chairman Kim Jong Un's health, rumors about his health have spread widely. This suggests that there are many people who think there is a very faint possibility of the two Koreas improving relations despite the results of the April 15 elections.

Instead of focusing on the election results, however, we need to carefully examine what South Korea has done over the past two years since the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration and ensure we have a proper understanding about how North Korea will engage in its "frontal breakthrough" strategy in 2020. The two Korea's trust in each other made the Panmunjom Declaration possible and brought about a new opportunity for prosperity and peace on the Korean Peninsula. The disappearance of trust between the two Koreas over the past year, however, has made it impossible for them to improve their relationship.

North Korea does not intend to rise to the challenge of improving the inter-Korean relationship just because South Korea wants it to. From the North Korean perspective, they need to continue with their "frontal breakthrough" strategy to complete the five-year economic development plan this year, successfully celebrate the anniversary of the founding of the country's communist party on October 10, and prepare for the holding of the 8th Party Congress in 2021. The situation has been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. In short, North Korea has neither the time nor the political conditions to move forward with improving the inter-Korean relationship.

US president Donald Trump also faces challenges to significantly change US policy toward North Korea due to his upcoming election and the COVID-19 pandemic. It remains difficult to envision the US and North Korea restarting talks in 2020. Even if the two sides were to restart talks, this would not necessarily mean that the relationship between the two Koreas could easily get back on track. Even if the South Korean government was to show more backbone in moving forward with its policies toward North Korea, the North would have little reason to go out on a limb if the South Koreans are unable to show they have autonomy in implementing policies toward North Korea. The creation of trust between the two Koreas can only happen if the US changes its policies and engages with North Korea more flexibly.

COVID-19 and inter-Korean cooperation

As the COVID-19 pandemic drags on and the US presidential election gears up, the international community has -- unsurprisingly - paid less and less attention to North Korea. Speculation over Chairman Kim's health have centered attention on the country once again, but this level of attention is not expected to last. Just like the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in 2018 sparked a new page in the history of inter-Korean relations, the COVID-19 pandemic could be another opportunity for improving the relationship between the two Koreas. We must, however, cautiously consider efforts to send support to North Korea based on unclear information and guesses about the COVID-19 situation in the country. North Korea claims that no COVID-19 infections have occurred, and the country is unlikely to ask for help from abroad unless the situation becomes uncontrollable.

With an eye on the post-coronavirus pandemic world, it would be more profitable to consider how to encourage North Korea to engage in a sustainable international joint effort to fight COVID-19. It is important to understand that COVID-19 is not just a problem faced by one country, but a human security issue shared by every country. South Korea has shown itself to be a leader in responding to COVID-19, but a future public health crisis will need a global response based on international solidarity, joint research and joint efforts to fight back any disease. The response to global pandemics will need to be based on efforts by all countries, regardless of their differences and place in the global hierarchy. North Korea's participation in these efforts could sow the seeds for change in the country, given that it is mired in sanctions imposed by the international community.

North Korea's weapons development: A scarier issue than COVID-19

North Korea's weapons development is a worrying area in the inter-Korean relationship, yet it also presents an opportunity for a shift in that relationship. Following the April 15 elections, there has been an effort to break through the current inter-Korean impasse by focusing on inter-Korean medical cooperation and the building of a pan-Korean railway. As Chairman Kim's recent activities have shown, however, North Korea is likely to try and eclipse its poor economic performance with exhibitions of military-related technologies. North Korea has conducted tests of its SLMB, the Pukgukseong 3, tested a new ICBM engine, along with tests of new short-range ballistic missiles during summer military exercises in July and August of last year. It is also expected to present a new ICBM and solid fuel engine during the military parade planned for October 10. The country's development of new weaponry and continued military exercises suggests that South Korea needs to focus on how to respond to these developments as they are expected to play a larger role than North Korea's economic factors in determining which way the inter-Korean relationship will head.

South Korea in the lead

On reflection, it was impossible to predict the next phase of the inter-Korean relationship in late 2017. Yet, the threat of war between the two Koreas vanished with the Panmunjom Declaration and gave the Korean people an idea of what peace and happiness could be like. The declaration lived and breathed on trust between the two Koreas. If all Koreans on both sides of the 38th Parallel are unable to enjoy a sense of peace, however, the Panmunjom Declaration's foundation will disappear. Two years after that historic event, we need to find a way to reinvigorate the agreements enshrined in that document.

South Korea needs to make it abundantly clear to North Korea that it will take preemptive and active measures to implement the agreements made in the Panmunjom Declaration. We need to move away from simply focusing on "successes" made to improve the inter-Korean relations based on the April 15 election results and work out what areas the two Koreas can move forward on together. We need to ensure there is limited damage from conflict between the US and South Korea and within South Korea during the process of improving inter-Korean relations to ensure the reconciliation process moves forward as quickly as possible. Specifically, we need to obtain the agreement from South Korea's National Assembly on the agreements made in the declaration so that we can move forward with enshrining these agreements into law.

The two Koreas moved one step toward peace two years ago despite the fact that the Cold War still exists on the Korean Peninsula. Another step was taken with the US-DPRK summit in Singapore, which signaled the end of one of the last vestiges of the Cold War. The absence of war on the peninsula, however, does not mean that peace has arrived. There are limits to just “protecting the peace,” which is based on outdated perspectives of national security. Just as the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us the importance of focusing on “non-traditional” security threats, we need a new model to bring about peace across the globe.

South Korea needs to take the lead in realizing this vision of peace just as it has shown leadership in beating back the COVID-19 pandemic. A focus on nontraditional security issues can bring about a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations. A broad-based effort among the countries of Northeast Asia to work together on economic and security issues will also play a role in bringing about an improvement in relations. South Korea is a central player in promoting peace both on the Korean Peninsula and abroad and that is why we need to ensure the Panmunjom Declaration’s agreements move forward.

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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