

Core Issues in Denuclearized Peace Regime-Building Process on the Korean Peninsula

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Since the inauguration of President Moon Jae-in on May 10, 2017, his goal has been to restore frozen inter-Korean relations for nine years under his predecessors, two conservative Presidents. Despite his efforts, inter-Korean relations are now in a stalemate even after three inter-Korean summits.

Moon's fundamental goal is to create a peaceful and prosperous Korean Peninsula. To achieve this goal, the normalization of inter-Korean relations will be necessary, eventually leading to a peaceful resolution of North Korea's nuclear issue and establishing a Korean unification-oriented peace regime without nuclear weapons.

In 2021, inter-Korean relations and US-North Korean relations are still frozen, and there are no signals to improve relations among the the Republic of Korea(the ROK), the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the United States. The author would like to discuss the three core issues surrounding the Korean Peninsula and possible solutions to these issues, including the restoration of frozen inter-Korean /US-DPRK relations, and the denuclearized Korean peninsula peace-regime issue.

The three core issues are: first, the end of the Korean war declaration issue, second, Chairman Kim Jong Un's 'conditional' denuclearization issue, and third, ROK's policy choice amid US-China hegemonic competition. Finally, the author will make several policy suggestions.

1. The End- of-War Declaration first, and a Peace Treaty later

Since the breakdown of the Hanoi US-DPRK second summit in February 2019, there has been no official discussion on the end of the war declaration between Washington and Pyongyang. Seoul and Pyongyang agreed to an end of war declaration at the first summit in Panmunjom on April 27, 2018, and spelled out the need to declare the Korean War's end in Article 3 (Paragraph 3) of the April 27(2018) joint statement.

ROK President Moon emphasized that "the war on the Korean peninsula must be completely and permanently ended now" through a video keynote speech at the 75th U.N. General Assembly on September 22, 2020. He also emphasized that the end of the war declaration would open the door to denuclearization and the way to a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. The motive for Moon's re-statement of the end of the war declaration was his strong commitment to restore the long-deadlocked Korean peace process.

Nevertheless, Washington's response to Moon's appeal was not favorable. The Trump administration repeatedly insisted on DPRK's denuclearization measures first. Meanwhile, as of

today, Pyongyang has no response to Moon's proposal.

In the author's view, it is desirable first to consider President Moon's proposal as the first step in the roadmap for establishing a denuclearized peace regime on the Peninsula. The end of the war declaration is necessary prior to concluding a peace agreement or treaty among the four concerned parties, the US, China, the ROK and the DPRK.

Pyongyang long wanted a formal declaration to end the Korean War. Thus, Seoul and Pyongyang signed April 27, 2018, joint statement at the first inter-Korean summit in which both agreed to the end of war declaration signed by the three or four parties, including the U.S., China, and two Koreas. China has officially stated that it would support the end-of-war declaration.

The Trump administration remained indifferent to the proposal of the end-of-war declaration. It preferred a peace declaration to an end-of-war declaration. Washington was not in a hurry to sign an end-of-war (or peace) declaration. There were two reasons. First, the U.S. called for visible progress in DPRK's denuclearization measures before signing a peace declaration. Second, Washington feared that Pyongyang would demand the reduction or withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea after signing a peace declaration. The Biden administration, however, may have different views on an end-of-war declaration.

The author has proposed a multilateral end-of-war (peace) declaration and a four-party peace treaty that are more binding than a bilateral end-of-war declaration between Washington and Pyongyang. In other words, the U.S., China, and two Koreas must sign an end-of-war declaration first before signing a peace treaty. A multilateral peace treaty would guarantee the survival of the North Korean regime demanded by Chairman Kim Jong Un.

Let us now take a closer look at Chairman Kim's "conditional" denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

2. Chairman Kim's 'Conditional' Denuclearization Issue

The DPRK has acquired its nuclear weapons through six nuclear tests and has successfully tested short, intermediate, and long-range missiles, including ICBM and SLBM (submarine-launched ballistic missile). The DPRK is now a de facto nuclear state. Many analysts argue that the DPRK will not give up nuclear weapons without achieving Kim's two essential conditions: (1) withdrawal of U.S. hostile policy toward the DPRK, and (2) the security guarantee on the North Korean system.

It is unfortunate that many people are not aware of Chairman Kim's two conditions. Kim said that if the United States assures the North Korean system's survival and security, there would be no need to have nuclear weapons. He also said that North Korea would produce more nuclear weapons because it has no choice but to strengthen its nuclear deterrence to the highest level by "self-defense" measures to survive the North Korean regime under the current international security environment.

Therefore, Washington must understand that the U.N. sanctions and pressures on North Korea cannot persuade Chairman Kim to give up its nuclear weapons so far. In the author's view, North Korea will likely abandon its nuclear weapons, ultimately if two conditions are satisfied.

Again, will Kim Jong Un abandon nuclear weapons and denuclearize the Korean Peninsula? As the highest dignity, Chairman Kim promised that he would give up nuclear weapons if only

two essential conditions exist. The two conditions Kim proposed in March 2018 are (1) the withdrawal of U.S. hostile policy. (2) the security guarantee on the North Korean system. The negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang ended up with failure because of different approaches to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The U.S. wanted DPRK's denuclearization first and the lifting of sanctions and compensations later. Thus, Washington appears to ignore Kim's two conditions for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

At this point, to induce Kim Jong Un to the negotiation table, Washington needs to consider accepting at least one of the two conditions. Moreover, due to domestic and international factors, Kim is under pressure to change to denuclearization and peaceful coexistence. Kim faces at least two factors affecting his strategic decision to continue pursuing the Korean Peninsula's denuclearization.

First, Kim's leadership is different from that of his grandfather and father. Since Pyongyang is a de facto nuclear state defending the North Korean regime, Chairman Kim will gain confidence and make a big deal with the United States. Thus, he promised nuclear abandonment in exchange for the two conditions.

Second, the North Korean economy is seriously deteriorating due to international sanctions against North Korea and the corona virus pandemic. North Korean people's dissatisfaction has risen due to the economic difficulties resulting from sanctions for many years and the deprivation of people's lives. Kim seems to understand that nuclear development cannot coexist with economic prosperity. Furthermore, North Korea faced a financial crisis due to strengthening international sanctions, and in 2020-21, the COVID-19 pandemic.

If the United States would be flexible over Kim's two conditions, the author firmly believes that the denuclearization process will speed up.

3. ROK's Choice: Balanced Diplomacy amid U.S.-China Hegemonic Competition

The author has have favored President Moon's "balanced diplomacy" in Northeast Asia. Considering that Korea is located between the continental and maritime powers, geopolitically in Northeast Asia, the ROK should maintain balanced diplomacy because US-China cooperation is essential to resolving the Korean peninsula issues. In response to the North Korean nuclear and missile threats, the ROK-US alliance needs to be healthier. Simultaneously, Seoul's strategic partnership with China is equally essential to resolving the Korean peninsula issues, including the denuclearized peace regime building issue.

To maintain balanced diplomacy, the ROK must adhere to the "three no" principles: (1) No participation in the M.D. (missile defense) system, (2) No additional Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) deployment in South Korea, and (3) No participation in US-led NATO-type anti-China security network in the Indo-Pacific. The balanced diplomacy would mean friendly relations between Seoul and Beijing.

The competition for supremacy between Beijing and Washington is getting worse. As the armed conflict between the two superpowers is growing in the South China Sea, Koreans are very concerned that the ROK may get involved in an unwanted local war between the United States and China.

In the hegemonic competition era, the Biden administration's strategic plan for an anti-China

NATO-type security network in the Indo-Pacific is gradually becoming explicit. The United States appears to unveil its intention to launch an Indo-Pacific version of NATO by uniting countries in the Indo-Pacific.

In summary, the Quad, including the U.S., India, Japan, Australia, a security alliance in the Indo-Pacific, will be expanded to form a new NATO-like partnership against China. The U.S. wants South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand to join a new security network.

Will the ROK participate in the new anti-China alliance system? The ROK faced this dilemma. However, it is desirable that the ROK maintains “balanced diplomacy” amid the US-China strategic competition. The author will make the following five arguments for non-participation in an anti-China NATO-type security network in the Indo-Pacific.

First, the Korean Peninsula geopolitically is located at the intersection of maritime and continental powers. Therefore, the ROK must seek the best choice, pragmatically transcending ideology and alliance. Put merely, Seoul's participation in an anti-China alliance system is not in the long-term national interest of South Korea.

Second, to assume the role of mediators or balancers in the era of US-China strategic competition, the ROK needs to maintain both American and Chinese friendly relations continuously by promoting "balanced diplomacy," strengthening the ROK-US alliance, and simultaneously maintaining a strategic partnership and cooperation with Beijing.

Third, in the era of international cooperation in the 21st century, the ROK's economic security is equally crucial for the Korean people's welfare and prosperity along with military security. The ROK surrounded by the four major powers of the U.S., China, Russia, and Japan, geopolitically, cannot stand in line with any of the major powers. Therefore, it is the best and wisest choice for Seoul to maintain balanced diplomacy to protect and enhance its national interests.

Although economic cooperation with China is essential to ROK's economic prosperity and survival, the ROK should correct the excessive export dependence (28%) on China and switch to a diversified trade policy.

Fourth, Seoul and Beijing are strategic partners with economic interdependence. The role of China in resolving Korean Peninsula issues is as important as that of the United States. Thus, China is a crucial player in establishing a denuclearized peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Suppose Seoul is in line with Washington in the U.S.-China hegemonic competition era. In that case, Beijing is likely to maintain a hostile relationship with Seoul, endangering its security interests.

Fifth, the ROK needs to make an in-depth analysis of Northeast Asia to make the best and wisest choice for the Korean people's survival and prosperity, thereby maintaining the balance and harmony between realism and liberalism in international relations. The Korean people must achieve a long-term goal of one Korea unification.

In the final analysis, Seoul's future policy should maintain balanced diplomacy in the U.S.-China strategic competition era. This policy direction is not a matter of choice that some have demanded the ROK to choose either the U.S. or China. Seoul should not select either one, but it should maintain balanced diplomacy to promote its national interest, which will be the best choice. Considering the Korean Peninsula's geopolitically unique circumstances, the U.S. should not force the ROK to choose its side. It is the ROK's national interest to maintain the ROK-U.S. alliance while keeping balanced diplomacy with China.

4. Author's Policy Suggestions for a Denuclearized Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula

In retrospect, the author cannot help but point out several lessons learned from the past denuclearization negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang.

First, the U.S., China, the DPRK, and the ROK need to define the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The four also need to agree to a roadmap for establishing a denuclearized-peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

Second, North Korea's 'phased approach' and Washington's step-by step approach are mutually complementary. Thus, Washington and Pyongyang must accept the ROK's proposal for a "comprehensive agreement-phased implementation" approach to denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula.

Third, the US, China and two Koreas need to discuss the denuclearization and a peace regime issues in parallel. "A Peace Treaty on the Korean peninsula," signed by the U.S., China, and the two Koreas, will satisfy the two preconditions for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula by Chairman Kim Jong Un: (1) the guarantee on the North Korean system and (2) No U.S. hostile policy.

Fourth, the concerned parties' willingness to make compromises and mutual concessions is essential to resolve the Korean Peninsula issues. When working-level negotiations on denuclearization between Washington and Pyongyang resume, they are ready to negotiate over their respective positions and approaches. Ultimately, a nuclear-free peace regime on the Korean Peninsula could be established only through mutual concessions and compromises.

Fifth, Pyongyang and Washington should refrain from sending hostile signals to each other. Notably, Pyongyang needs to respect the red line set by the United States. Thus, Pyongyang should refrain from testing nuclear and long-range missiles. In the meantime, Washington also needs to consider refraining from US-ROK combined military exercises around the Korean Peninsula.

Finally, a policy of pressure and stricter sanctions on the North Korea is unlikely to resolve its nuclear issue. Thus, we must search for an alternative approach to the sanctions/pressure policy toward North Korea. The DPRK and the Biden administration needs to consider making mutual concessions and compromise in order to achieve the mutually acceptable goal of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula. **/End/**