

What is the “Axis” for a New Order on the Korean Peninsula?



President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at the Summit Meeting, Feb. 2019, Hanoi. (Photo AP/AFLO)

In November 2017, North Korea declared the completion of its nuclear force and took a substantial step toward “dialogue mode.” In April of the following year, it announced a voluntary moratorium of nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests and the abandonment of its nuclear test site. With this as a turning point, the situation on the Korean Peninsula began to transform rapidly as other countries with various motives became involved. The South Korean government under President Moon Jae-in, which was inaugurated in 2017 under a banner of peaceful coexistence and co-prosperity with North Korea, broke the ice. North-South contact resumed in

the wake of North Korea’s participation in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in February 2018 and resulted in the first North-South summit in 11 years at Panmunjom in April of the same year. In addition, seeking to simultaneously advance denuclearization and establish a peace regime, the South Korean government focused on mediation between the United States and North Korea and, in March, it obtained a promise from both the United States and North Korea via a special envoy to attend the first-ever summit between the two countries.

Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of

North Korea, turned to active summit diplomacy and made a surprise visit to Beijing as his first overseas trip at the end of March, immediately after the agreement on a US-North Korea summit. At that time, Chairman Kim Jong-un secured China's support for the US-DPRK summit while seeking understanding of North Korea's position that the denuclearization process be phased in.

The US-DPRK summit meeting was held in Singapore in June, and the two leaders confirmed the direction of a new US-DPRK relationship, a peace regime, and denuclearization. In the run-up to the US-DPRK summit, there were further mediation efforts by the ROK government through another North-South summit in Panmunjom and support by China through a China-DPRK summit in Dalian, both held in May 2018.

However, the broad and vague agreement between the leaders of the United States and North Korea did not bridge the gap between the two countries on the details of the denuclearization process and, in the course of the high-level talks held afterward, differences over specific measures for denuclearization surfaced. Under such circumstances,

South Korea stepped in for the third time and attempted to expand its role from “mediator” to “arbitrator”. By making an overarching agreement with North Korea at the North-South summit in September that included easing military tensions, deepening cooperation and reaffirming the DPRK's denuclearization, South Korea aimed to advance North-South relations and use it as a springboard for US-DPRK dialogue. However, the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula and the denuclearization of North Korea were essentially issues to be discussed between the United States and North Korea and, since the United States, Japan and other countries concerned maintained a cautious stance within the framework of international economic sanctions on North Korea, South Korea faced limitations in using economic cooperation as leverage in advancing inter-Korean relations.

The second US-DPRK summit meeting (Hanoi) was held in February 2019, but the meeting ended in failure due to differences of opinion between North Korea, which insisted on a drastic relaxation of economic sanctions in exchange for the abandonment of the Nyongbyon nuclear site alone, and the United States, which insisted on

the abandonment of all weapons of mass destruction (WMD) – including chemical and biological weapons – and missile-related facilities.

Since then, North Korea has continued to employ its two-pronged tactic of lauding President Trump personally and criticizing the US government in an attempt to win concessions from the United States. Moreover, while carefully calculating the tolerance of the United States, it has repeatedly conducted test launches of short-range ballistic missiles, new multiple rocket launchers, and SLBMs (submarine-launched ballistic missiles) (a total of 12 launches between May and October 2019), and is trying to apply both hard and soft pressure toward its own self-imposed deadline of year's end. On the other hand, China and Russia are moving closer to North Korea, out of concern that tensions might return and with the intention of using their influence over North Korea as a diplomatic card (a Russia-North Korea summit meeting was held in April 2019, and China-DPRK summit meetings were held in January and June 2019).

Since the Singapore summit, the United States has maintained its policy of

reducing the scale of its regular US-ROK joint military exercises, and has continued to express its intention to carry on with dialogue by taking the position that it does not regard North Korea's launch of short-range ballistic missiles as a problem. It is thought that President Trump's calculations on establishing diplomatic legacy and using this to influence domestic politics are behind this.



North Korea test-fired a “super-large multiple rocket launcher” at an undisclosed location, Oct. 2019. (Photo KNS/KCNA/AFP/AFLO)

President Trump and Chairman Kim again met on the northern side of Panmunjom at the end of June 2019, and the resumption of talks was announced. However, at the Stockholm working-level talks held in October, the dispute over denuclearization measures and incentives did not seem to be settled.

Needless to say, the process of denuclearizing a country requires more than 10 years even if it proceeds smoothly.

It is inevitable that negotiations between the United States and North Korea, which harbor deep mutual distrust, will take a long time. It is all the more true because there seems to be a wide gap in perceptions of denuclearization between the US and DPRK. What is genuinely needed today, therefore, is for the countries concerned to reconcile their respective visions of the regional order with the denuclearization of North Korea as the first step.

Furthermore, when considering concrete measures for denuclearization, we should not forget the fact that comprehensive multilateral agreements including concrete denuclearization measures, such as Joint Statement 9.19 (2005) and Joint Statement 2.13 (2007) at the six-party talks, have already been reached. Despite such agreements, the disputes over procedures and interpretations of declaration, verification, and reward eventually allowed North Korea to buy time to improve its nuclear and missile capabilities.

Based on this lesson, it should be reaffirmed that the most important precondition for a permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula is North Korea's denuclearization, namely “final and fully verified denuclearization

(FFVD)”, and this has to be shared among the countries concerned. In addition, to attain FFVD, North Korea's nuclear inventory of existing nuclear weapons and related facilities must be declared and identified. Only under such conditions should what is widely known as phased denuclearization and compensation measures be discussed.

In addition to the denuclearization issue, it is necessary to solve not only the ICBM issue, which the United States is particularly concerned about, but also the issue of short-range and medium-range missiles, which pose a greater threat to neighboring countries, as a package. Only when these perceptions are shared by the countries concerned will North Korea realize the need to shift from the tactic it has employed since the Agreed Framework (1994) to buy time and to make its possession of nuclear weapons a fait accompli.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of existing economic sanctions against North Korea must be ensured in order to elicit a sincere response from the North. The recent revelation of North Korea's illicit import and export “network” indicates that sanctions will not be fully effective until import and export control systems are shared among the

countries concerned. Strengthening export and import controls on strategic and nuclear-related materials will contribute not only to resolving North Korea issues but also to maintaining the regional and international orders as international public goods. We urge all countries concerned to agree on this point and work together to improve their capabilities.

The Japan-US-ROK trilateral framework is particularly important for Japan in considering the formation of an order on the Korean Peninsula with the denuclearization of North Korea as a starting point. The greater the gap between neighboring countries, the freer the hand North Korea will have and, if the independent action of one country to secure leverage on North Korea hinders a coordinated response among the countries concerned, denuclearization will be further delayed. Japan for its part opposes any easing of sanctions before North Korea takes concrete action to denuclearize and Japan must make efforts so that the US and ROK share this posture. In order to respond to the missile threat posed by North Korea, it is essential for Japan and South Korea to cooperate in supporting the actions of the US military, and to maintain the link between their respective alliances

with the United States. The Japan-ROK General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) is a symbol of such linkage and must be maintained regardless of Japan-ROK bilateral relations.

Only when the process of denuclearization proceeds and tensions are eased under this premise can Japan become involved in the “bright future after denuclearization” that President Trump has dangled before North Korea. Negotiations on the pending bilateral issues between Japan and North Korea may then be incorporated into the process. At the same time, however, it may be necessary to quietly start discussing the risks in the event of failed negotiations on denuclearizing North Korea and restricting its missiles, including a deterrent regime led by the United States and Japan.

While there are some outstanding issues between Japan and South Korea at present, it is necessary to calmly resolve each issue, bearing in mind the major developments on the Korean Peninsula and the importance of cooperation among Japan, the United States, and South Korea. ■