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The DPRK's Changed Nuclear Doctrine: Factors and Implications

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ABSTRACT

The Korean Peninsula is sliding irreversibly into a nuclear era. Since the Korean War, the nuclear threat of the United States toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has been a constant. The variable was whether the DPRK would acquire its own nuclear arsenal. But the conclusion that the DPRK reached during the talks in 2018–2019—and more broadly, over the past three decades – is that dialogue and negotiations are pointless. In connection with that, it is very important to recognize that the DPRK has fundamentally changed since the summer of 2019. At the heart of that is the nuclear program on which the DPRK has staked its national pride. The Pyongyang regime under Kim Jong-un believes that its nuclear program will not only reinforce national security but also contribute to economic development by enabling spending cuts on conventional forces and promoting a shift from the military to the civilian economy. That process culminated in the adoption of a law about the DPRK's nuclear policy by the Supreme People's Assembly on 8 September 2022. Kim declared on that occasion that defining nuclear policy in law had “made our state's status as a nuclear weapon state irreversible”. In short, the DPRK's nuclear weapons have become another constant. This development means that a new approach is required to resolve the Korean Peninsula issue. In particular, the nuclear weapons-free zone, which was rarely discussed as a solution to the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula, should be reviewed as a methodology for denuclearization.

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Introduction: Irreversible Nuclear Era

The Korean Peninsula is sliding irreversibly into a nuclear era. Since the Korean War, the nuclear threat of the United States toward the DPRK has been a constant: continuous, planned, and reiterated. The variable was whether the DPRK would acquire its own nuclear arsenal. But the conclusion that the DPRK reached during the talks in 2018–2019—and more broadly, over the past three decades – is that dialogue and negotiations are pointless.

In connection with that, it is very important to recognize that the DPRK has fundamentally changed since the summer of 2019. For nearly three decades prior to that,

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Pyongyang's key goal was normalizing relations with the United States. But then the DPRK-US summit in Hanoi, in February 2019, ended without a deal, torpedoing the outcome of the South-North-US summit in Panmunjom on June 30 of that year. That was the point when the DPRK's strategy underwent a fundamental change.

At the heart of that is the nuclear program on which the DPRK has staked its national pride. The Pyongyang regime under Kim Jong-un believes that its nuclear program will not only reinforce national security but also contribute to economic development by enabling spending cuts on conventional forces and promoting a shift from the military to civilian economy. Kim Jong-un is confident that the DPRK can gain strategic status if its nuclear arsenal serves as a "deterrent" against the hostile states of the Republic of Korea (ROK), the United States, and Japan and an "independent weapon" for the friendly states of China and Russia.

That process culminated in the adoption of a law about the DPRK's nuclear policy by the Supreme People's Assembly on 8 September 2022. Kim declared on that occasion that defining nuclear policy in law had "made our state's status as a nuclear weapon state irreversible". In short, the DPRK's nuclear weapons have become another constant (Cheong 2022b).

This article examines the changes in security environment in and out of the Korean Peninsula and analyzes in-depth factors affecting the DPRK's nuclear doctrine. Then, it reviews the need to revitalize the discussion of a nuclear weapons free zone to prevent nuclear war and revive the prospects of peace and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

A 'New' DPRK

Turning Point: Summer 2019

Familiar to many, the DPRK was very poor and desperately wanted to normalize relations with the United States and resolve economic sanctions. But this familiar DPRK is in the past. And a "New DPRK" has come.

Some experts are calling for the ROK and the United States to completely overhaul their DPRK policy on the grounds that the North's nuclear capabilities have reached the point of no return. The primary goal of Seoul and Washington's DPRK policy has been the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. But since that's effectively no longer an option, those pundits say, the ROK and the United States need to revise their DPRK policy. There's some merit to that argument.

We need to pay attention, however, to other critical changes in the DPRK that may be less noticeable than its nuclear and missile arsenal. There are three such changes. First, the DPRK appears to have basically abandoned efforts to improve relations with the ROK, the United States, and Japan. Second, the DPRK's economic difficulties are likely not as severe as people in other countries think. Third, the the DPRK leadership has changed its mind about economic sanctions.

Since the early 1990s, Korean Peninsula issues had centered on a certain interplay between the DPRK's nuclear issue on the one hand and the ROK, the United States, and Japan on the other. Pyongyang's nuclear development was a factor motivating hardline policies in Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo, while also presenting these governments with

the diplomatic challenge of having to pursue dialogue and negotiation. The DPRK, for its part, had set the aim of thawing its relationships with those three sides – the United States in particular – through a mixture of brinkmanship at certain times and dialogue and negotiation at others. But since late 2019, the DPRK has been firmly closing the door to dialogue. A crucial factor in this is its conclusion that it could no longer expect anything to emerge from its summits with the ROK and the United States, which had yielded only hollow results when they took place between 2018 and 2019. Let's look at what happened at that time.

Kim Jong-un, who had spent more than 120 hours on a train between Pyongyang and Hanoi, was greatly shocked when the second DPRK-US summit, held in Hanoi at the end of February 2019, ended without a deal. As if he felt sorry for this outcome, Trump sent a letter on March 22 to comfort Kim. Trump wrote of the great hopes and expectations he had to achieve something with Kim in the months and years to come, so long as the two held fast to their common goals. Perhaps when he received the letter, Kim thought, "I am going to give this another go, even though I hate him". In a reply sent 80 days later, Kim wrote, "I also believe that the deep and special friendship between us will act as a magical force" that will bring about progress in DPRK-US relations, adding, "I believe the one day will come sooner or later when we sit down together to make great things happen". Two days later, Trump responded with "I completely agree" (Cheong 2022a).

Trump was scheduled to visit Seoul following the G20 summit held in Osaka, Japan. On the morning of June 29, however, just before departing for Seoul, he tweeted, "While there, if Chairman Kim sees this, I would meet him at the Border/DMZ just to shake his hand and say Hello!" (Cheong 2022a). Kim Jong-un accepted the proposal, and President Moon Jae-in accompanied Trump to this spontaneous meeting the next day. At the meeting, Trump promised to cancel South ROK-US joint exercises scheduled for August. Kim reciprocated by saying that he would accept working-level talks with the United States and proposed for such talks to take place in August.

However, an American or ROK announcement canceling the August joint exercises never came. Rather, according to then-US national security advisor John Bolton, Bolton had met with his ROK counterpart, Chung Eui-yong, on July 24 and agreed to go through with the scheduled drills. The Ministry of National Defense announced in early August that it would conduct joint exercises in the middle of that month.

Following this, Kim Jong-un penned a long letter to Trump on Aug. 5, in which he wrote, "My belief was that the provocative combined military exercises would either be cancelled or postponed ahead of our two countries' working-level negotiations where we would continue to discuss important matters". Kim asked, "What has Your Excellency done, and what am I to explain to my people about what has changed since we met?" He also stressed, "If you do not think of our relationship as a stepping stone that only benefits you, then you would not make me look like an idiot that will only give without getting anything in return". In contrast with the apparent nervousness of his previous correspondence, he concluded, "We are in a different situation, and we are not in a hurry" (Cheong 2022a).

Since then, Pyongyang has almost entirely given up its desire to normalize relations with the United States and has been clearly signaling that it intends to reorient its security on nuclear weapons, its economy on autarky, and its foreign policy on China and Russia. And the DPRK has been making considerable progress toward those ends. The

advancement of its nuclear program is widely acknowledged, and contrary to assessments from the outside, it is likely that the DPRK economy has been steadily improving. Whereas the DPRK's nuclear program used to be an obstacle in its relationships with China and Russia, those relationships have recently been at their strongest since the 1990s despite Pyongyang's nuclear development drive.

So, what is the economic situation in the DPRK? What is the possibility that the DPRK's economic difficulties may not be that serious? The notion of the DPRK being "hard up" has been presented in various forms, including engagement policies calling for the use of humanitarian assistance, economic cooperation, and relief from economic sanctions to motivate Pyongyang to change, as well as hardline policies calling for the continuation and intensification of sanctions to pressure the DPRK to change or hasten its collapse.

But what if the DPRK is not as poor as the outside world thinks? In July 2021, Pyongyang submitted a voluntary national review to the UN, in which it reported an annual average economic growth rate of 5.1% over the five-year period from 2015 to 2019. That number was fully 6% higher than the Bank of Korea's estimate over the same period. The Bank of Korea has estimated North Korea's growth rate at -0.9% from 2015 to 2019. I don't know who's right. However, I had been told by various experts and officials in China that the DPRK economy has improved remarkably from 2017 to 2019. In addition, there was an analysis that the main background of economic development was the significant increase in the proportion of nationalization since the DPRK adopted the "Economy-Nuclear Parallel Policy" in 2013.¹

It is also noteworthy that Kim Jong-un has strongly criticized the lack of performance in economic development plans before but has been saying that results have been coming out since 2022. It is also interesting that Chinese President Xi Jinping said in a letter to Kim Jong-un on 13 October 2022, "I am pleased that the DPRK people are constantly making new achievements in economic development and improving people's lives under the leadership of the Workers' Party of Korea, led by Comrade General Secretary" (Yonhap News 2022).

Another important aspect of the new DPRK is the shift in its attitude when it comes to economic sanctions: rather than attempting to pursue a situation without sanctions, it has switched focus to living with them. In the past, the DPRK made a fuss about the sanctions spearheaded by the United States and called for them to be lifted. But after its experience with the hollow outcomes of its summits with the United States, it has changed its stance, viewing sanctions instead as a good opportunity to achieve self-directed regeneration and self-sufficiency.

These three changes are as important as the DPRK's nuclear armament in underscoring the need to fundamentally reconsider the current approaches to DPRK policy. The normalization of Pyongyang's relations with Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo was a key corresponding measure in the denuclearization process. If the DPRK has more or less given up on that diplomatic aim, that spells a serious risk of crucial leverage in DPRK policy disappearing. It also means the approach of trying to get the DPRK to change – either through humanitarian assistance and economic cooperation or through longer, tougher sanctions – has passed its sell-by date.

¹Personal communications with Chinese experts and officials in Beijing intermittently from 2017 to 2019.

Changed Military Actions of the DPRK

The changed DPRK can be repeatedly confirmed in the “2022 Autumn Crisis”. At that time, South Korea-US-Japan and the DPRK staged armed protests without any concessions, which heightened military tensions on the Korean Peninsula. It began with the arrival of the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier strike group to the port city of Busan and ROK-US conducted scheduled joint naval exercises with the USS Ronald Reagan in the East Sea in late September 2022. The DPRK, which refused to sit idly by as this unfolded, launched several ballistic missiles designed to simulate one loaded with a tactical nuclear warhead. Since then, the ROK-US alliance and the DPRK were quickly becoming engulfed in a contest of strength, with both sides engaged in tit-for-tat shows of force until November 2022.

In the past, although the ROK-US or ROK-US-Japan joint exercises sparked backlash from the DPRK, it refrained from responding with military action while the drills were being carried out. But this time was different. The DPRK immediately responded to each particular bilateral and trilateral military exercise in a different manner. In particular, the DPRK was not hesitant to make dangerous choices in the process. Examples include firing shells into buffer zones set by the 9/19 military agreement or landing missiles on the ROK side’s international waters for the first time since the division in 1945.

This section shows how military confrontation between the ROK, the United States, and Japan on one side and the DPRK on the other is causing all sides to become more and more similar to each other. While “Fight Tonight” is the traditional slogan of the ROK-US alliance, this time the DPRK also demonstrated that it is constantly prepared to wage combat. In addition, the Yoon Suk-yeol administration has put great emphasis on the ROK’s “alliance in action” with the United States as well as on trilateral security cooperation with the United States and Japan with the goal of demonstrating not merely through words but also through action the iron-clad will of the three countries to respond strongly to provocations by the DPRK. The DPRK has changed as well. It not only has offered diplomatic criticism of the ROK-US and ROK-US-Japan joint drills and military buildup, but it has also demonstrated through action that it can respond in kind.

This shift can be attributed to the DPRK’s newfound confidence stemming from its belief that it achieved a balance of power by strengthening its nuclear arsenal.

The DPRK’s Changed Nuclear Doctrine

What Changed?

The DPRK has legislated nuclear posture twice in 2013 and 2022. Comparing the two laws, the laws enacted in 2022 are much more aggressive. Under the 2013 law, the DPRK declared, “If another hostile nuclear power invades or attacks our republic, nuclear weapons can only be used by the final order of the Supreme Commander of the Korean People’s Army”. This means that the DPRK would not use nuclear weapons to attack other nuclear powers first, but it could retaliate with nuclear weapons even if nuclear powers attack the DPRK with non-nuclear weapons as well as nuclear weapons.

On the other hand, the 2022 law stipulated that nuclear weapons could be used not only when the aggression and attack by hostile forces actually took place, but also when “it is judged that they are imminent”. This makes it possible to interpret that the DPRK’s

nuclear doctrine was close to No First Use in 2013, while it adopted a preemptive nuclear attack doctrine in 2022.

The conditions for using nuclear weapons that the DPRK laid out in the 2022 law are themselves very aggressive. While the authority to use nuclear weapons is reserved for Kim himself, the condition for such use is stipulated as cases in which a nuclear or non-nuclear attack on the state leadership or the state nuclear command apparatus by hostile forces has been carried out or is judged to be imminent. Significantly, the law emphasizes that if an accident befalls Kim, as the person with the authority to order the use of nuclear weapons, “a nuclear strike shall be launched automatically and immediately to destroy hostile forces including the starting point of provocation and the command according to operational plans decided in advance”. That provision seems largely aimed at forestalling a “decapitation operation” by the ROK-US alliance, which has threatened to “prevent a nuclear strike by eliminating the person capable of authorizing one if there are indications that the DPRK will use a nuclear weapon”.

The DPRK’s new law also provides the following conditions under which nuclear weapons can be used: when a nuclear attack or an attack by another weapon of mass destruction has been carried out or is judged to be imminent, when major strategic assets of the state have suffered a devastating military attack or when such an attack is judged to be imminent, when there is an unavoidable operational need during a crisis to prevent the escalation or prolongation of war and to seize the initiative in the war, or when there is no choice but to respond with nuclear weapons following the occurrence of a crisis with devastating consequences for the survival of the state or the lives and safety of the people.

Rather than focusing the mission of the nuclear arsenal on deterrence, therefore, the law stipulates that a preemptive strike can be launched when a major attack from the outside is believed to be imminent. That said, this doctrine is similar to those of most nuclear weapon states except for China, which has disavowed the preemptive use of nuclear weapons.

There is another point that merits our attention. The DPRK has been regarded as one of the world’s most closed-off countries, but at least in regard to its nuclear policy, Pyongyang has staked out the most specific and concrete stance of all. That reflects the DPRK’s desire to compensate for its inadequate military capabilities by flaunting its willingness to use nuclear weapons, so as to strengthen its war deterrence. At the same time, the DPRK implicitly asks “hostile forces” not to create conditions for the use of its nuclear weapons.

Factors Influencing the DPRK’s Nuclear Doctrine

There are various factors affecting the DPRK’s nuclear doctrine. Firstly, international factors include intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Kim Jong-un has seen these changes in the international situation and identifies today’s international order as a “new cold war” and a “multipolar world”.

The intensification of the US-China strategic competition inevitably brings about a crisis in Northeast Asia, especially surrounding Taiwan. This is because if a crisis occurs in the Taiwan Strait, both Koreas and Japan could be involved in the alliance

chain. Following the war in Ukraine, the Taiwan Strait is the next area emerging as a new flash point between the United States and China. The DPRK's nuclear doctrine, which has turned offensive amid the growing regional crisis, reflects this perceived threat.

The Sino-DPRK Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, signed in July 1961, is the only mutual defense treaty the two countries have maintained so far. And Article 2 of the Treaty states that “The Contracting Parties undertake jointly to adopt all measures to prevent aggression against either of the Contracting Parties by any state. In the event of one of the Contracting Parties being subjected to the armed attack by any state or several states jointly and thus being involved in a state of war, the other Contracting Party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal”.²

Like this, the automatic intervention clause is included in the Sino-DPRK Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty. This means that if an armed conflict occurs in the Taiwan Strait and the United States and its allies intervene, the DPRK must also make some choices. The DPRK's dilemma stems from this. This is because the impact on DPRK-China relations can be huge. To support China militarily, the DPRK have to worry about getting involved in the war. The DPRK's choice of this dilemma is geared toward strengthening its deterrence through nuclear weapons.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and prolonged war is also affecting the DPRK's nuclear posture. It is highly likely that the DPRK would once again confirm the security risks of voluntary denuclearization through the example of Ukraine. The DPRK regards Ukraine, which has chosen denuclearization, as a bad example, and is more confident that only nuclear weapon guarantees security. In addition, the UN Security Council's failure to respond to the DPRK's missile tests as the world's attention is focused on the Russian invasion of Ukraine provides an optimal environment for the DPRK to diversify its nuclear capabilities and pursue aggressive nuclear doctrine.

Although these changes in the international environment are affecting the DPRK's nuclear posture, changes in the security environment inside and outside the Korean Peninsula can be said to be a more direct factor.

Since DPRK's nuclear and missile development began in earnest, the focus of the ROK-US response has been on “tailored deterrence”. The key contents include the ROK-US's preemptive strike and decapitation operation when the ROK-US detects imminent signs of the DPRK's nuclear use, an attempt to intercept a DPRK missile with a missile defense, and an overwhelming and decisive response to the DPRK's nuclear use.

It is noteworthy that the DPRK is also pursuing “tailored deterrence” through diversification of nuclear weapons and legalization of nuclear policies. The DPRK is militarily inferior compared to the ROK, the United States, and Japan. According to Global Fire Power, a US military evaluation agency, the DPRK ranks 30th in the world as of 2022, while the United States ranks first, Japan fifth, and the ROK sixth (GlobalFirepower.com 2023). Nuclear weapons are missing from this evaluation, which is important. The militarily inferior DPRK regards its nuclear weapons as an “equalizer” that can make up for its inferiority. It also seeks to offset the lack of military capabilities through the communication of a concrete and offensive nuclear doctrine.

²Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, July 11, 1961. https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/china_dprk.htm.

The DPRK-style “Dead Hand” doctrine is aimed at deterring the decapitation operation of the ROK-US alliance. The DPRK said it could launch a nuclear preemptive strike even if it judged that the enemy’s attack was imminent, which is also “decalcomani” with the Korea-US alliance’s preemptive strike theory. This means that the right to preemptive strike is not only in the enemy but also in the DPRK, and the intention is to deter the opponent’s attempt to preemptive strike itself by adopting the doctrine of nuclear preemptive strike.

The ROK-US operational plans and combined drills consists of two stages: defense and counterattacks, which also include the DPRK’s occupation and stabilization operations. In this case, the expansion and continuation of the Korean war and the threat of the DPRK’s existence could be threatened, and the DPRK is trying to influence the gains and losses of the ROK-US alliance by signaling that such attempts will turn into a nuclear war.

The DPRK’s diversification of missiles means that it will disable the missile defense of the ROK, the United States, and Japan and provide tailored deterrence against the ROK, Japan, Guam, Hawaii, and the US mainland. The DPRK considers the missile defense of the ROK-US-Japan as a main component of their preemptive strike and has taken various measures to avoid them. A case in point is the development of hypersonic missiles, cruise missiles, and the DPRK version of an Iskander missile, which is difficult to intercept.

“Balance of terror” of the Korean Peninsula?

In response to the DPRK’s nuclear posture, the ROK and the United States have also been cranking up their own threats against the DPRK, such as in the joint statement published following a meeting of the high-level Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group on 16 September 2022. “The United States and the ROK expressed their serious concern over the DPRK’s escalatory and destabilizing messaging related to nuclear weapons use, including its adoption of the new nuclear policy law”, the statement said. “The United States and the ROK made clear that any DPRK nuclear attack would be met with an overwhelming and decisive response”. In the same statement, the United States also committed “to draw on the full range of its military capabilities, including nuclear, conventional, missile defense, and other advanced non-nuclear capabilities, to provide extended deterrence” (Jeong 2022).

As if to demonstrate that commitment, strategic assets including nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, stealth fighters, and strategic bombers have been appearing more frequently on and around the Korean Peninsula. The ROK and the United States plan to conduct field maneuver training equivalent to the past Foal Eagle exercises 20 times in the first half of 2023 alone. In the past, Foal Eagle was the world’s largest military exercise involving around 300,000 people. In addition, the ROK and the United States decided to include preparations for the DPRK’s nuclear use scenario in joint exercises, which means that the scale and frequency of deployment of strategic assets in the United States will increase.

The words of the leaders of the two Koreas are also becoming more and more harsh. They do not hesitate to refer to each other as “the main enemy”, and they do not hesitate to use the term “preparation for war”. Not just words. The DPRK, which launched a record-breaking missile launch in 2022, is presenting “mass production of tactical nuclear weapons” and “exponential increase in nuclear warhead stocks” as the basis for

building national defense this year. The ROK also plans to invest about \$300 billion over the next five years in a massive arms buildup (Cheong 2023). It seems like a distant past when the leaders of the two Koreas met in 2018 and agreed on non-war, non-aggression, and gradual disarmament. An extreme form of cold war thinking to keep the peace while giving the other side the fear of annihilation is taking place on the Korean Peninsula.

Then, is a “balance of fear” scenario possible on the Korean Peninsula? It is a question that arises when we look at the way the peninsula seems to be sliding irreversibly into a nuclear era. A popular phrase during the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union, the “balance of fear” amounts to a minimum appeal to human self-preservation instincts and reason – the idea that both sides should refrain from any foolish actions that would get everybody killed. Some argue that the fear of annihilation helped prevent World War III. This is why some people refer to the cold war era as a “long peace”.

But what about a place like the Korean Peninsula, where US nuclear weapons are sharply pitted against DPRK ones and the two Koreas are sharply opposed? That brings us back to our first question. Is the doctrine of war deterrence – based on the balance of fear – credible on the Korean Peninsula? In short, that equilibrium is likely to be more precarious than it was during the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union.

As is implied by the term “intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM)”, the United States and the Soviet Union had 5,500 km between them, whereas the ROK-US alliance and the DPRK are only separated by the military demarcation line and Demilitarized Zone. During the Cold War, there was the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which aided “international peace and strategic stability” by effectively banning missile defense systems. But around the Korean Peninsula, the countries of the ROK, the United States, and Japan are gradually expanding their missile defense systems.

If the South Korea-US alliance’s surveillance of the DPRK can be compared to high-powered binoculars, it is little exaggeration to say that the DPRK’s surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities are comparable to a blindfold. One lesson of the cold war era is that even the most advanced intelligence assets are vulnerable to human misjudgments and misunderstandings, not to mention mechanical malfunctions that can potentially lead to nuclear war. But given the DPRK’s severely backward intelligence capability, how could it judge that a major attack from the outside is imminent?

Comparing the situation during the cold war to that on the Korean Peninsula today reveals another major difference. The United States and the Soviet Union normalized relations in 1933, and the two countries continued to exchange ambassadors during the cold war and even after Russia took over from the Soviet Union. The two sides also maintained a hotline. That kind of communication was instrumental in preventing various crises – including the Cuban missile crisis in 1962—from escalating into nuclear war. Compared to that, there are no channels of communication worth mentioning between the ROK-US alliance and the DPRK. The DPRK and the United States have never normalized their relations during the 75 years since the regime was established in Pyongyang, and inter-Korean relations continue to worsen.

There have been several war crises in the past. However, the end of the crisis was often in sight. However, the seriousness of the problem lies in the fact that the end of today’s crisis cannot be known. In the past, many factors have been used to turn confrontation

into dialogue and crisis into opportunity. First of all, behind the escalation of the crisis on the Korean Peninsula by the DPRK's brinkmanship tactics, there was often an underlying intention to press the ROK and the United States into a dialogue. However, the DPRK's nuclear weapons in the past had the attributes of a diplomatic means, the current and future DPRK nuclear weapons are becoming an end in themselves.

The aspect in which the crisis on the Korean Peninsula is changing from the past can be confirmed in the fact that even the "mediator of the conflict" is not appropriate. It is also noteworthy that the crisis on the Korean Peninsula is unfolding around inter-Korean relations. In the past, war crises mainly stemmed from US-DPRK relations. However, since 2020, the central axis of the conflict has moved to inter-Korean relations. Relations between the two Koreas have continued to deteriorate since anti-DPRK groups in the ROK spread leaflets against the DPRK, and the DPRK blew up the Kaesong liaison office in protest in 2020.

Taking all these factors into account, keeping the peace through the balance of fear on the Korean Peninsula is very unstable.

Conclusion: Change the Course

How should policies be redesigned in the face of this new DPRK and unstable balance of fear? We need the wisdom to see not just the nuclear weapons and missiles that the DPRK possesses, but also the state-of-the-art weaponry piling up in the ROK, US, and Japanese arsenals. Most importantly, we must confront the fact that the DPRK's changes are a product of its interactions with the outside world. There should also be a public discussion about making an agreement to prevent nuclear war on the Korean Peninsula. While that would involve the discomfort of acknowledging the DPRK as a de facto nuclear weapon state, it would also meet an urgent need – helping to prevent nuclear war.

As such, mutual hostility and shows of force are increasing day by day, but both sides hope for the same thing: avoiding war. Recently, however, both sides have come to completely rely on deterrence, threatening to blow the other to smithereens in the case of an armed attack. If words and actions aimed at preventing war are in actuality leading us to a situation in which we need to worry about the possibility of war, a different approach is needed. What is urgently required now is the suspension of DPRK nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches, as well as the ROK's joint exercises with the United States and Japan. In particular, the ROK and the United States, which have an overwhelming advantage in power, should declare a moratorium on large-scale military exercises and offer dialogue to the DPRK.

ROK-US-Japan also needs to change the course on the DPRK nuclear issue. They should not only ask the DPRK to give up nuclear weapons, but also seek ways to resolve the US nuclear threat against the DPRK. In this regard, if we broaden our horizons to the world, we can find a solution based on international norm. That is the nuclear weapons free zone. Currently, Africa, Central and South America, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia are nuclear-weapon-free zones, and there are 116 countries in these zones. The right to create a nuclear-weapon-free zone are included in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Article 7 of the NPT mentions, "Nothing in this Treaty affects the right of any group of States to conclude regional treaties in order to assure the total absence of nuclear weapons in their respective territories". There is a UN document

containing its definition and goals, and the UN Security Council's resolution 1887 (2009) has promised to support and cooperate. The UN Committee on Disarmament established guidelines for establishing nuclear-weapon-free zones in 1999, which were approved by the UN General Assembly.

A new path to a solution to the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula can be found here. One of the most important causes of repeated failures in denuclearization negotiations in the past has been the failure to reach an agreement on the definition of denuclearization. Accordingly, while setting the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as a long-term goal, it is necessary to publicize a plan to set the definition and goal as a nuclear-weapon-free zone. Discussions on nuclear-weapon-free zones can begin at the Korean Peninsula level and expand to Northeast Asia.

The nuclear-weapon-free zone on the Korean Peninsula is a treaty in which the two Koreas conclude a treaty as intra zone, and the five official nuclear powers, including the United States, China, Russia, Britain, and France, as well as permanent members of the UN Security Council, can be parties to the extra zone. The basic content of its protocol is that the two Koreas do not develop, produce, possess, test, or receive nuclear weapons, and do not possess uranium enrichment and reprocessing facilities in accordance with the 1992 Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. In addition, nuclear powers guarantee that they do not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons in the ROK and DPRK, and that they do not deploy nuclear weapons and their means of delivery in a legally binding form.

As such, the nuclear-weapon-free zone can secure binding force under international law and is the most appropriate method for sustainable denuclearization. Multilateral Legally Binding Denuclearization (MLBD) as an alternative to Complete, Verifiable, Irreversible Denuclearization (CVID) or Final, Fully Verified Denuclearization (FFVD), which are unilateral and excessive demands on the DPRK, is needed to be considered.

Of course, there may be realistic restrictions on the nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Korean Peninsula. First, there is a possibility that the United States will not readily agree. This is because the United States has traditionally taken a passive stance on nuclear-weapon-free zones that could cause setbacks to its nuclear strategy. As mentioned earlier, however, nuclear-weapon-free zones have become a norm in the international community, and the United States has agreed to them. Above all, the nuclear-weapon-free zone holds the possibility of resolving the DPRK nuclear issue that has not been resolved for 30 years.

It is unclear whether the DPRK will agree. This is because there will be no certainty about whether the US nuclear threat to the DPRK can be fundamentally resolved through a treaty. However, the nuclear-weapon-free zone is superior to the methods discussed so far in that it is a multilateral and legally binding solution to the resolution of the US nuclear threat to the DPRK. The nuclear-weapon-free zone also contains similar content to the "denuclearization of the *Chosunbando*" (Korean Peninsula) that the DPRK has been insisting on. For this very reason, the nuclear-weapon-free zone can be a practical "maximum pressure" to the Kim Jong-un regime. At the same time, it can pave the way for Kim Jong-un to make an honorable choice. This is because the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone on the Korean Peninsula has a historical meaning of realizing the behests of the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il eras.

In diplomatic negotiations, especially negotiations between adversaries, there is no solution that will completely satisfy either side. This is difficult to achieve even against a defeated country. So, a negotiation plan that allows the negotiating parties to have satisfaction and dissatisfaction at the same time is rather realistic. A proposal to resolve the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula through a nuclear-free zone may fall into this category.

Disclosure statement

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