The Moon Jae-in administration’s North Korea policy and Korea–US relations

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present the North Korea policy pursued by the Moon Jae-in administration and discuss the possibility of a weakened alliance between South Korea and the USA.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper compares the North Korean policies and the ROK–US alliance under the Moon administration, analyzing the recent inter-Korean and North Korea–US summits, with a focus on the issues of denuclearization and establishing a peace regime.

Findings – This paper reveals that the approach taken by the Moon administration regarding North Korea is similar to that of North Korea and China, and that the ROK–US alliance is likely to weaken should there be any change concerning the North Korean nuclear issue.

Originality/value – Denuclearization takes place in accordance with the agreement between North Korea and the USA, there is a high likelihood of the ROK–US alliance weakening.


Paper type Research paper

From confrontation to negotiation: seeking structural changes to the Cold War dynamic on the Korean Peninsula

In 2017, the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia faced a crisis as the USA responded strongly to North Korea’s two nuclear tests and firing of long- and medium-range missiles. As the Trump administration implemented the strongest ever sanctions on North Korea through the UN Security Council, the USA also pressured China to take part in sanctioning the North. In addition to these actions, the Trump administration also implemented a number of multilateral and unilateral measures to apply strong pressure to North Korea, including sending the message that the USA would not rule out military options in order to stop North Korea from obtaining nuclear weapons.

As this tense situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula continued, the Moon Jae-in administration, which came to power in May 2017, introduced a North Korea policy that aimed to improve inter-Korean relations and emphasized the role of South Korean leadership in inducing North Korea to denuclearize. However, due to the repeated confrontations between the USA and North Korea, including nuclear and missile provocations and declarations of war that crossed the red line, the North Korean nuclear issue quickly became one of the biggest problems facing the new South Korean Government. The Moon administration’s policy attempted to resolve the issue by harmonizing the KORUS alliance with inter-Korean cooperation and adopting an integrated approach of sanctions and dialogue. However, due to the Trump administration’s insistence on sanctions against North Korea, the Korean Government’s policy created a mismatch between the KORUS alliance and inter-Korean relations. The Moon administration had little diplomatic leeway to pursue this policy for a number of reasons, including the international nature of the North Korean nuclear issue, the Northeast Asia policies of China and the USA, and North Korean attitude that favored dealing with the USA directly.

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Against this background, Chairman Kim Jong-un announced in his New Year's Address on January 1, 2018 that North Korea would be participating in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics, and with athletes taking part in the Olympics in February, the situation on the Korean Peninsula began to change rapidly. When a high-level delegation from North Korea visited the South during February, President Moon told the delegates that dialogue between North Korea and the USA was essential to furthering inter-Korean relations, and urged North Korea to pursue such dialogue (Yonhap News, 2018). At the suggestion of Chairman Kim Jong-un, the inter-Korean summit was held at Panmunjeom on April 27, which led to more amicable relations between the two Koreas.

On June 12, a historic North Korea–US summit was held in Singapore. Through this summit, the first ever between two countries that had viewed each other as enemies for a long time, the two leaders agreed to normalize relations between North Korea and the USA, and seek to establish a peace regime. On the issue of denuclearization, the most important item on the agenda, the two heads of state agreed that both countries would work together toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The North Korea–US summit served as an opportunity to change the Cold War dynamic that had lasted 70 years on the Korean Peninsula. In line with this, it is becoming more likely that structural changes will take place in both inter-Korean relations and the KORUS alliance. Until now, the Moon administration has played a leading role throughout this process, cooperating with North Korea and helping to set up the North Korea–US summit. As the Moon administration plays a mediating role between inter-Korean relations and the KORUS alliance, interest is growing in how the dynamics of inter-Korean relations and the KORUS alliance will change in the wake of the North Korea–US summit.

Against this background of recent changes on the Korean Peninsula, this paper focuses on the following four points. First, examining the Moon administration’s North Korea policy, which aims to find an independent solution to issues on the Korean Peninsula through inter-Korean cooperation and a policy of accommodation and engagement. Second, analyzing the discussions surrounding denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime that were agreed upon at the inter-Korean summit and North Korea–US summit. Third, looking at the conflict that occurred between South Korea and the USA during the early stages of the Moon administration, and comparing the positions of South Korea and the USA on the issue of compensation to North Korea that may arise during the process of denuclearization. Fourth, discussing the likelihood of a weakened KORUS alliance resulting from the normalization of North Korea–US relations through denuclearization.

The Moon Jae-in administration’s North Korea policy: placing inter-Korean cooperation above the KORUS alliance

A policy of appeasement toward North Korea that emphasizes dialogue and cooperation

Previous South Korean administrations, most notably the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun Governments, pursued a “Sunshine Policy” of engagement with North Korea, and the North Korea policy being implemented by President Moon and the ruling Democratic Party can be seen as a modern version of the same policy, tailored to the current circumstances. When campaigning as a presidential candidate, Moon stated that he would “build on the Sunshine Policy and a policy of engagement toward North Korea to create change in the North” (Yonhap News, 2017a). The South Korean policy of appeasement toward North Korea, and inter-Korean cooperation, were most prominent following the Kim Dae-jung administration’s inter-Korean summit in June 2000 and throughout the Roh Moo-hyun Government. The Roh administration focused more on inter-Korean cooperation than KORUS relations, but was unable to make much progress because of disharmony with the Bush administration, North Korean nuclear test and intensified conflict within South Korean society about the North Korea policy. The Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye Governments that
came after the Roh administration paid closer attention to the KORUS alliance, but inter-Korean relations deteriorated during this period. In contrast, the Moon administration seeks to build on the work of the Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Dae-jung Governments to revive and expand inter-Korean relations.

The Moon administration believes that both the North Korea policy of the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye Governments and the Obama administration’s policy of “strategic patience,” have failed to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. Although the Moon Administration has spoken of a two-track approach that includes both sanctions and dialogue, the main focus has been on dialogue. In this sense, the government believes that the issue must be resolved through dialogue, and sanctions are a tool that can be used in negotiations with the North (Choi, 2017). The Moon administration does not treat denuclearization as a precondition to improved inter-Korean relations, instead trying to build mutual trust by resuming dialogue with North Korea (Cho, 2017, p. 21). Through inter-Korean cooperation, the administration seeks to play a mediating role in the difficult relations between North Korea and the USA, and to encourage North Korea to engage in dialogue and negotiations.

Accordingly, the Moon Government has largely amended or abolished the North Korea policies of previous governments and is pursuing a policy that aims to resume economic support to North Korea. If the North Korean issue becomes more favorable to negotiations, the Moon administration wishes to reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Geumgang tours that had been shut down under the previous administration, as well as resume inter-Korean economic cooperation that was brought to a halt by Lee Myung-bak’s May 24 measures. Moon also seeks to implement the “June 15th South–North Joint Declaration” that was agreed upon during former President Kim Dae-jung’s visit to North Korea in 2000, as well as the “2007 South–North Summit Declaration” that was signed on October 4 during the summit meeting between Roh Mo-hyun and Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang.

The ultimate goal of the Moon administration is to establish a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula on the condition that North Korea engages in denuclearization. A basic conception of the Moon Government’s North Korea policy was outlined in the “Berlin Initiative” which was announced on July 6, 2017 in Berlin. Through the Berlin Initiative, the South Korean Government made a number of suggestions to North Korea including the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, signing a peace agreement, reuniting separated families and ceasing all hostile actions at the DMZ. It also put forward an economic plan that laid out a new economic map for the Korean Peninsula and expressed interest in further exchanges and cooperation in non-political sectors. In addition to this, the South Korean Government suggested reopening official channels of communication between the two Koreas, including a summit meeting, inter-Korean exchanges for humanitarian purposes and the participation of North Korean athletes in the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics (Moon, 2017).

This policy, which places more emphasis on inter-Korean relations than the KORUS alliance, created an environment conducive to allowing North Korea to take the lead in relations between the two Koreas. In particular, the domestic political situation in South Korea, which had its hands tied under the confrontational Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations, has now become a great opportunity for North Korea. Beginning with the impeachment of Park Geun-hye, the domestic political changes that have taken place in South Korea led to the collapse of the conservative right, and the rise of the progressive left through the Moon administration presents a good opportunity for the North. By forming a relationship with the amicable Moon Administration, the North is now looking at improved inter-Korean relations and ultimately the possibility of a North Korean-led unification of the Korean Peninsula.

Accordingly, North Korea’s attitude has changed remarkably, from engaging in continued nuclear and long-range missile provocations as recently as last year to suddenly promising denuclearization and suggesting inter-Korean and North Korea–US summit meetings. Directly after launching the ICBM “Hwasong-15” on November 29, 2017,
Chairman Kim Jong-un declared that North Korea had completed its nuclear program. It appears that at this point, Kim had already begun to give thought to improving inter-Korean relations and engaging in dialogue with the USA. As he stated in his New Year’s Address, Kim aimed to change the nature of North Korea–US relations through negotiations, based on this nuclear capacity. In this sense, the biggest factors contributing to North Korea’s denuclearization promise and willingness to engage in dialogue appear to be North Korea’s confidence in its enhanced nuclear capacity and the amicable attitude of the new South Korean Government. Other reasons that helped to bring North Korea to the negotiating table include the UN Security Council’s sanctions and military pressure from the USA.

*Emphasizing the role of “South Korean leadership” in Korean Peninsula issues*

The Moon administration has put forward the idea of “putting South Korea in the driver’s seat,” which involves South Korea taking the lead in solving problems on the Korean Peninsula, including the North Korean nuclear issue. During his presidential campaign, Moon stated “South Korea does not wish to sit in the backseat and watch the US and China negotiate, we want to take the lead on Korean Peninsula issues” (*The Washington Post*, 2017). The Moon administration came to power due to support from progressives and radical nationalists. Support from the bolstered ranks of centrist as well as division among conservatives contributed to Moon’s overwhelming victory in the presidential election. Both progressives and nationalists in South Korea advocate self-reliance in external relations and take particular interest in inter-Korean relations. The Moon administration contains a number of figures who were members of the staunchly anti-American, pro-Korea independence political movement by radical leftist students in the 1980s. They participated in pro-democracy demonstrations against South Korea’s military regime at the time and advocated for the abolishment of the KORUS alliance, claiming that South Korea was being held subordinate to the USA. At the same time, they believe in cooperation with North Korea due to the ethnic ties between the two countries, and that inter-Korean relations are more important than the KORUS alliance. They are also tolerant of North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. During the student protests, some even followed North Korea’s Juche ideology of self-reliance. Most of the officials that make up the diplomacy and security lines of the Moon administration are advocates of dialogue with North Korea or South Korean self-reliance (*Weekly Kyunghyang*, 2017).

President Moon’s biggest achievements during the first KORUS summit in June 2017 were having South Korea’s leadership on inter-Korean relations and peaceful unification recognized, and confirming that the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) from the US to the South Korean army would soon be possible. The transfer of wartime command dates back to the Roh Moo-hyun administration. At a KORUS summit held in September 2006, President Roh Moo-hyun agreed that the transfer of OPCON would take place in 2012. However, the date of the transfer was adjusted during the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations. The Lee Myung-bak Government pushed the date back to December 1, 2015, while the Park Geun-hye Government decided that “no date of transfer would be set, and a decision would be made based on whether the conditions agreed upon by both countries had been met” (*The Hankyoreh*, 2014). The transfer of wartime command would bring about structural changes to the operating system of the ROK–US Combined Forces and the Japanese support system for the US Armed Forces in Korea (USFK) in the event that a war broke out on the Korean Peninsula. The transfer would boost the independent military operations of the South Korean army. However, it is unclear whether the transfer would help to maintain and reinforce the KORUS alliance, and it would be unlikely to lead to the military cooperation between the USA, South Korea and Japan that the USA is seeking.
Throughout 2017, the Moon administration experienced a phenomenon of “Korea passing” where South Korea was pushed to the sidelines when it came to Korean Peninsula issues, in particular the North Korean nuclear issue. While the Trump administration imposed strong sanctions and pressure on North Korea and cooperated closely with China, the Moon Government was unable to proactively deal with the political situation in Northeast Asia surrounding the Korean Peninsula. With North Korea’s sixth nuclear test and enhanced nuclear capability, it was difficult for the Moon administration to pursue a policy of appeasement. In this situation, the Moon administration instead attempted to engage in civilian exchanges in non-political fields and provide humanitarian support to the North, while cooperating with the USA on North Korean issues. The government tried to make the most of the Olympics as a symbol, using the PyeongChang Olympic Games as a starting point to restore inter-Korean relations. North Korea’s participation in the Olympics served as a good opportunity for the Moon administration to implement its North Korea policy.

In this sense, the participation of North Korean athletes in the games provided an opportunity to put South Korea in the “driver’s seat” on the Korean Peninsula. This came to fruition when Chairman Kim Jong-un suggested a North Korea–US summit meeting through a South Korean delegation that visited North Korea after the Olympics had finished. China also feels positively about the independent role of the Moon administration, as the country has previously suggested summit meetings between the two Koreas and the USA and North Korea to discuss solutions to the North Korean nuclear issue. China has stressed the independent role that South Korea should play in the North Korea–US summit, stating that South Korea is not simply a third party and has the right to participate or express opinions (环球时报, 2018). The Moon administration’s desire to take the lead in resolving Korean Peninsula issues, including denuclearization, demonstrates that the government has adopted an approach that places inter-Korean relations above the KORUS alliance in this matter. This is in line with the position of North Korea, which seeks to resolve the issues through independent settlement between the Korean peoples, and China, which seeks to reduce US influence in issues pertaining to the Korean Peninsula. The Moon administration’s approach of seeking denuclearization, peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and the resolution of issues through dialogue, is similar to China’s policy on the Korean Peninsula.

The inter-Korean summit and North Korea–US summit

Inter-Korean summit: building a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula through inter-Korean Cooperation

At the April 27 Inter-Korean Summit, held at the Peace House in the Southern part of Panmunjeom, President Moon and Chairman Kim Jong-un signed the Panmunjeom Declaration. The Panmunjeom Declaration states that the leaders of both countries agree to: facilitate comprehensive and groundbreaking advancement in inter-Korean relations; alleviate the acute military tension and practically eliminate the danger of war on the Korean Peninsula; and actively cooperate to establish a permanent and solid peace regime on the Korean Peninsula (Ministry of Unification, 2018a, p. 1).

During the summit, the two leaders viewed cooperation between the Korean people as paramount. Section 1 of the Panmunjeom Declaration states “South and North Korea will reconnect the blood relations of the people and bring forward the future of co-prosperity and unification led by Koreans by facilitating comprehensive and groundbreaking advancement in inter-Korean relations” (Panmunjeom Declaration, 2018). South and North Korea also listed a number of past cooperative projects based on past agreements, and agreed in principle to reduce conventional armaments, as long as North Korea does not violate the international community’s current economic sanctions. The two leaders agreed to thoroughly implement previous agreements between the South and North Korea.

To achieve a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, President Moon and Chairman Kim Jong-un affirmed their commitment to non-aggression and refraining from the use of force, and agreed to strictly abide by these principles. “During this year that marks the 65th anniversary of the Armistice, South and North Korea agreed to actively pursue trilateral meetings involving the two Koreas and the United States, or quadrilateral meetings involving the two Koreas, the United States and China with a view to declaring an end to the War, turning the armistice into a peace treaty, and establishing a permanent and solid peace regime” (Ministry of Unification, 2018a, pp. 12-13). In addition to this, the two Koreas agreed to complete denuclearization in order to build a peace regime. It appears that both leaders view establishing a peace regime as more important than denuclearization. In other words, denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime will be implemented simultaneously, and “establishment of a peace regime” refers to the stipulation in Article 4 of the 2007 South–North Summit Declaration.

The most notable feature of the Panmunjeom Declaration is that it focuses on inter-Korean cooperation on the basis of the North Korean expression uriminzokkiri, which means “between our peoples.” However, the meaning of inter-Korean cooperation in South Korea is different from that in North Korea, in the same way that North Korea and the USA have a different understanding of “complete denuclearization.” The concept of inter-Korean cooperation means “national cooperation” in North Korea, which refers to the people of the two Koreas responding to foreign powers together. According to this North Korean concept, South Korea would have to fight together with North Korea against American imperialist attempts to start a war on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea also believes that its nuclear ambitions are for the purpose of protecting the Korean people from American attacks. Accordingly, the “national cooperation” that North Korea advocates refers to cooperation where both Koreas combine their power based on the principles of self-reliance of the Korean people, “anti-war peace” and unified patriotism to stave off foreign powers, including the USA (Kang, 2005, pp. 7-10). When Chairman Kim Jong-un mentioned “it is time for the Korean people to discuss ways to improve inter-Korean relations and boldly seek a new path” (North Korean Central Broadcasting, 2018) in relation to the North’s participation in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics, he was speaking to North Korea’s conception of national cooperation. The USA interpreted North Korea’s participation in the Olympics and suggestion for inter-Korean dialogue as a strategic move to interfere with KORUS relations (Park, 2018, p. 1).

The inter-Korean summit laid the foundation for the Moon administration to achieve the North Korea policy contained in the Berlin Initiative. It also served as a justification for North Korea to receive economic support from South Korea in parallel with denuclearization. If North Korea–USA relations improve and the process of denuclearization begins, as agreed upon at the North Korea–US summit, sanctions against North Korea would be relaxed and economic support could begin. In this situation, it is likely that the cooperative projects agreed upon during the inter-Korean summit could be fully implemented.

*Denuclearization negotiations for establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula*

With the Panmunjeom Declaration largely focusing on the issue of developing bilateral relations and establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, the only statement on denuclearization was that the two countries agreed to “complete denuclearization” in principle. The document stipulates “South and North Korea confirmed the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.” By specifying both “complete denuclearization” and North Korea’s concept of a “nuclear-free Korean Peninsula,” the Panmunjeom Declaration incorporates both the American and North Korean visions of
denuclearization. In the North Korean English translation of the text, this section was written as “turning the Korean Peninsula into a nuclear-free zone through complete denuclearization” (North Korean Central News, 2018, April 28). In this way, the statement on denuclearization in the Panmunjeom Declaration refers to a denuclearization process that is conditional, phased and guarantees the survival of the North Korean regime.

North Korea interprets “complete denuclearization” as “a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula” which means that North Korea, as a nuclear power, would engage in nuclear disarmament. According to the North Korea conception of “complete denuclearization,” nuclear disarmament must take place on an equal footing with the USA, since North Korea is also a nuclear power. This means that North Korea, as a self-declared nuclear power, is using its nuclear capacity primarily for the purpose of engaging in negotiations with the USA. North Korea has stated that it will engage in negotiations when a state of “mutual deterrence” (Waltz, 1990, pp. 732-736) is reached between the two nuclear powers. In this sense, North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons goes beyond ensuring regime survival and is a method of pressuring the USA. North Korea seeks to achieve its desired structural changes in North Korea–US relations while retaining its nuclear capability.

Prior to the 2018 inter-Korean summit, a written decision adopted at the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 7th Congress of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea on April 20 stated that North Korea would suspend all nuclear tests and the test launching of ICBMs. The document stated that suspending nuclear tests was an important part of the process of international nuclear disarmament, and that North Korea had made the decision to support the international community’s aspirations and efforts to completely stop all nuclear testing. In addition to this, North Korea promised that it would refrain from using nuclear weapons and transferring nuclear technology as long as the regime was not faced with any nuclear threats or provocations. At the Plenary Meeting, Chairman Kim Jong-un announced that North Korea would replace its byeongjin (two-track) policy of economic growth and nuclear development with a “new strategic line” that prioritizes economic development. The new strategic line states that since North Korea has already become a strong nuclear power, it will prioritize economic development over nuclear development in the future. This refers to incomplete denuclearization, where North Korea retains its current nuclear weapons but refrains from any further nuclear tests or launching of ICBMs. In addition to this, North Korea announced that it will shut down the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site in the northern part of the country. This can be viewed as a symbolic gesture for the sake of the North Korea–US summit, since the North has already developed its nuclear program to the point where no further testing is necessary and continued use of the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site would be difficult.

In April 2012, North Korea declared itself a nuclear power through a constitutional amendment, and had been focusing on upgrading its nuclear capacity ever since announcing the byeongjin policy at a Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party in March 2013. Last year, North Korea conducted two nuclear tests and stated that the second of these, the regime’s sixth nuclear test in total, was a hydrogen bomb test. With this, the country claimed to have become a strong nuclear power. On November 29, 2017, North Korea declared that it had finished its nuclear program after a test launch of the ICBM Hwasong-15 (North Korean Central Broadcasting, 2017). This announcement at the end of last year was designed to serve as a domestic justification for engaging in dialogue with other nations. In his New Year’s Address, Chairman Kim Jong-un also expressed confidence in the ability of North Korea’s completed nuclear program to act as a nuclear deterrent against the USA, and stressed that North Korea would act responsibly as a strong nuclear power. He also called for an end to joint South Korea–US military exercises and the deployment of patrolling US strategic assets in order to improve inter-Korean relations (Ministry of Unification, 2018b, p. 3).
North Korea has repeatedly made it clear that the denuclearization demanded by the USA will only be possible if the USA first guarantees the regime’s survival. In a statement issued by a spokesperson for the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs on October 17, 2015, North Korea stressed the principle of “a peace agreement first, denuclearization second” in resolving the nuclear issue. The conditions that North Korea has laid out for assurance of the regime’s survival include making public any US nuclear weapons within South Korea, the destruction and verification of all nuclear weapons within South Korea, suspending the development of all US methods of nuclear attack, an end to nuclear threats against the North and a commitment to refrain from using nuclear weapons, and the withdrawal of USFK (Rodong Sinmun, 2016a). North Korea reaffirmed at the 7th Party Congress that these five conditions must be met in order to proceed with denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. While emphasizing the country’s own nuclear capacity, North Korea stated that it would put an end to the US policy of hostility toward North Korea, convert the Armistice Agreement into a peace agreement and drive US forces out of South Korea.

The denuclearization that North Korea advocates is similar to China’s policy of “talks and negotiations” which aims to implement the denuclearization process and peace agreement negotiations simultaneously. China’s policy seeks to solve the North Korean nuclear issue through denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the signing of a peace agreement between the USA and North Korea (Yi, 2017). Since this approach is similar to that of the Moon administration, it appears that South Korea, North Korea and China are all effectively cooperating in terms of the process and method of achieving denuclearization. In June last year, Moon Chung-in, Special Advisor to President Moon Jae-in for Foreign Affairs and National Security, suggested that South Korea and the USA could reduce the scale of their joint military exercises if North Korea agreed to refrain from engaging in nuclear and missile tests, which is similar to the “suspension for suspension” idea put forward by China (Chung, 2017, p. 3). With the atmosphere shifting toward dialogue and negotiation on the North Korean nuclear issue, it appears that both countries have effectively adopted this suggestion, with North Korea deciding to refrain from nuclear and missile tests and South Korea and the USA deciding to scale down their joint military exercises.

Accordingly, North Korea believes that the detailed denuclearization process should be conducted “simultaneously, and in phases.” Kim Jong-un also made reference to simultaneous, phased denuclearization during the first China-North Korea summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The fact that Kim chose to hold his first summit meeting after becoming North Korean leader with China was to curry Chinese support for the abolishment of the US policy of hostility toward North Korea in the lead up to the North Korea–US summit. Kim believed that first normalizing relations with China would give him an advantage in the North Korea–US summit, and he met with Xi Jinping again in Beijing on June 19, just one week after the conclusion of the North Korea–US summit. Three visits to China within a three-month period is unprecedented for a North Korean leader, and with the series of summit meetings, relations between China and North Korea have now become even closer than the blood alliance the two countries shared in the past.

The North Korea–US summit: agreement on guaranteed regime survival and denuclearization to improve North Korea–US relations

The North Korea–US summit was held in the Capella Singapore Hotel on Sentosa Island, Singapore on June 12. At this meeting, President Trump and Chairman Kim signed a joint statement that contained the following four sections:

1. US and North Korea commit to establish new US-DPRK relations in accordance with the desire of the peoples of the two countries for peace and prosperity. 2. The two countries will join their efforts to
build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. 3. Reaffirming the April 27, 2018 Panmunjom Declaration, North Korea commits to work towards the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. 4. US and North Korea commit to recovering remains of prisoners of war including the immediate repatriation of those already identified. (Seoul Sinmun, 2018, June 12)

The crux of the agreement is that both countries will work to improve North Korea–US relations. In the joint statement, the two leaders agreed to work to achieve a peace regime and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula for the sake of improving and normalizing North Korea–US relations. On the issue of denuclearization, which generated the most attention, the “complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization” (CVID) that the USA had demanded up until right before the summit was not mentioned in the statement. Although the USA claims that Section 3 of the statement effectively refers to CVID, the actual text of the statement refers to the “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” that North Korea has demanded for some time. Paradoxically, through this summit the USA effectively acknowledged North Korea as a nuclear power while also reaching agreement on complete denuclearization. The USA effectively accepted North Korea’s suggestion that both countries, as nuclear powers, can engage in discussions for conditional, phased denuclearization. Accordingly, there is room to interpret this summit meeting as a form of the nuclear disarmament talks that North Korea has long advocated for.

Since there is nothing new in the agreement that the two leaders reached on denuclearization, it could be said that the summit produced no concrete outcome on the issue of denuclearization. The first section of the joint agreement repeats the content of previous agreements, stating that the two countries promise to work to improve bilateral relations on the precondition of denuclearization. This statement is taken from the 1994 Agreed Framework and the Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks on September 19, 2005, in which the USA and North Korea reached agreement on the nuclear issue. The section about improving bilateral relations is similar to the agreement reached in the lead-up to the aborted North Korea–US summit attempted by former president Clinton near the end of his term. During the Clinton administration, the US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited North Korea in October 2000 and signed the US-DPRK Joint Communique which promised improved bilateral relations on the precondition of denuclearization. The final talks between North Korea and the USA in 2012 led to the 2.29 Agreement, which also included a statement about North Korean prior action on denuclearization and improving bilateral relations.

Section 2 of the most recent joint statement, which reads “The two countries will join their efforts to build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula,” is the same as the stipulation in Section 3 the Panmunjom Declaration, which states “South and North Korea will work together to achieve complete denuclearization and build a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.” The 1994 Agreed Framework and the Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks also contain similar wording. The Agreed Framework, which was signed on October 21, 1994, states “The US will provide formal assurance to the DPRK against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the US.” The Joint Statement, signed on September 19, 2005, states that in return for North Korea renouncing its nuclear weapons and nuclear plans, the country will be able to receive economic support, establish diplomatic relations with the USA and be provided with light-water reactors. In addition to this, Article 4 of the statement specifies that the parties “will negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula at an appropriate separate forum.” The September 19 Joint Statement also stipulates “The United States affirmed that it has no nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula and has no intention to attack or invade the DPRK with nuclear or conventional weapons.” During the South Korea–US summit held in November 2006 in Hanoi, President Bush mentioned that he was willing to sign an end of war declaration and peace treaty with North Korea if the country abandoned its nuclear ambitions.
At the recent North Korea–US summit, the two leaders agreed to improve bilateral relations through a comprehensive agreement. As North Korea received the guarantee of regime survival that it was looking for through this comprehensive agreement, there is hope that this kind of agreement could lead to progress in North Korea–US relations and revitalized inter-Korean relations (Hong, 2002, p. 165). If the agreement is thoroughly implemented, it is likely that liaison offices could be established in both Washington and Pyeongyang. The North Korea–US summit meeting also served as an occasion for the USA to secure itself against nuclear threats from North Korea. If North Korea developed missiles armed with nuclear warheads that were capable of attacking the USA mainland, the USA may end up in a situation where it needs to exercise the military option (Haass, 2017, pp. 4-5), but at present North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missiles are a sufficiently urgent and clear threat to the USA.

The problem is that complete denuclearization will take a substantial period of time, and thorough verification of North Korea’s nuclear facilities and materials will be required as part of this process. There have been several attempts to reach a compromise on the North Korean nuclear issue in the past, but these failed due to differences of opinion on the nature and verification of denuclearization. Accordingly, the success or failure of implementing the agreement reached at the North Korea–US summit depends on reliable verification during the denuclearization process. Even if the complete denuclearization that North Korea promised is achievable, it is likely that this will only be completed in the final stage, after the regime’s survival has been guaranteed. Changes in the political situation between the two countries could also revert the nuclear issue back to the original position at any time. This means it could be very risky to establish a regime of peace that includes a guarantee of regime survival before North Korea has completely denuclearized.

Since Chairman Kim Jong-un received a guarantee of regime survival in return for his denuclearization promise at the North Korea–US summit, this provides him with a justification to ask for the guarantee first during denuclearization negotiations. If the USA refuses to establish a concrete mechanism that guarantees regime survival, North Korea now has a reason to break the agreement at any time, as it has done in the past, and this reason is contained within the joint statement. During the process of transitioning to a peaceful regime, North Korea may also demand the withdrawal of the USFK. Article 4 of the Armistice Agreement signed between the USA, China and North Korea in 1953 stated that all foreign armies would be withdrawn from the Korean Peninsula. In line with this, China withdrew its forces from North Korea by 1958. On the other hand, since the USFK still remains as part of the KORUS alliance, North Korea has continued to demand the withdrawal of such troops (Lee, 2017, pp. 3-4). By announcing that the USA would suspend joint South Korea–US military exercises directly after the summit, President Trump was accommodating North Korea’s demand. Ever since completing its 4th nuclear test on January 6, 2016, North Korea has continued to call on the USA and South Korea to cease such joint military exercises (Rodong Sinmun, 2016b). With North Korea being effectively acknowledged as a legitimate country through the North Korea–US summit, it has secured a diplomatic foundation for playing a more active role in Northeast Asia. Kim Jong-un’s international reputation has also been boosted by the fact that President Trump appears to have avoided bringing up North Korea’s human rights abuses.

Conflict between the USA and South Korea during the early stages of the moon administration and the possibility of future conflict on the issue of North Korean compensation during the denuclearization process
Conflict between the USA and South Korea over North Korea policy during the early stages of the Moon administration
Since the USA, South Korea and North Korea reached agreements at the recent summits, in a broader sense the three countries are heading toward a more cooperative relationship.
During the early stages of the Moon administration, South Korea experienced significant conflict with the USA over the proper response to the North Korean nuclear issue. While the Moon Government favored a policy of dialogue with North Korea, the Trump administration viewed sanctions as a greater priority. This difference in opinion caused significant friction between the two countries last year. With a policy of “maximum pressure and engagement,” the Trump administration refused to acknowledge North Korea as a nuclear power and applied strong economic sanctions and heavy diplomatic pressure on North Korea to denuclearize. At the same time, the USA did not seek regime collapse or regime change in North Korea and fundamentally sought to resolve the issue through dialogue (Washington (AP), 2017). At the South Korea–US summit meeting on June 29, 2017, the leaders of both countries agreed that they would work closely together to achieve “complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” To deter further provocations from the North, South Korea and the USA decided to apply maximum pressure while also fully implementing existing sanctions alongside other new measures. President Trump also confirmed that the USA would use all of its military power, including its conventional and nuclear capacity, to provide extended deterrence to South Korea. (White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2017). At the same time, he made it clear that the door to dialogue was open “under the right circumstances,” indicating that South Korea and the USA are not implementing a policy of hostility towards North Korea.

This summit meeting confirmed that ending the North’s nuclear program was a goal of the KORUS alliance, but President Moon emphasized dialogue while President Trump stressed the importance of sanctions and pressure. This represented a difference of opinion on approaching the North Korean nuclear issue, with Moon advocating a dual approach of sanctions and dialogue while Trump stated “The era of strategic patience is over” (The Guardian, 2017). President Moon was vague when it came to describing a detailed solution to change the status quo. The so-called Korea passing that took place during the early stages of the Moon Administration occurred because of the government’s ambiguous attitude. At a time when North Korea was enhancing its nuclear and missile capacity, Moon’s dialogue-based North Korea policy was in stark contrast to the sanctions favored by the USA and Japan. The Moon Government was staunchly opposed to military action, believing that sanctions should be used as a tool to entice North Korea to the negotiating table and that North Korea’s demands would have to be met to some extent in order to resume talks. In this sense, South Korea’s position on this issue was close to that of China.

The Moon and Trump Governments also had different views on providing support to North Korea. The USA stated that any South Korean engagement with North Korea must comply with UN Security Council resolutions, and that resuming projects which involved investment in North Korea, such as the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Geumgang tours, was a violation of sanctions against the North. The USA insisted that any humanitarian projects involving North Korea must be discussed with the USA in advance, transparent and not involve cash payments (Kim, 2017, p. 9). The South Korean Government’s suggestion of an inter-Korean military talk in July 2017 was also met with a chilly response from the Trump administration due to its implications for existing sanctions (The JoongAng Ilbo, 2017).

Although the situation has changed since last year, the USA believes that current sanctions against North Korea should remain in place until the North begins to take concrete steps toward denuclearization. On this point, the fact that the two Koreas “agreed to adopt practical steps toward the connection and modernization of the railways and roads on the eastern transportation corridor as well as between Seoul and Sinuiju for their utilization” at the inter-Korean summit in April could become a contentious issue between the USA and South Korea, since such action would neutralize the economic sanctions that the Trump administration has used as an important source of pressure on North Korea (Kim, 2018, p. 3).
If the Moon administration is quick to engage in large-scale economic cooperation and offer support to North Korea before denuclearization can be confirmed, it could lead to conflict with the USA.

The Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system was deployed in response to the North Korean nuclear threat as part of a deal between South Korea and the USA during the Park Geun-hye administration. During the early stages of the Moon administration, this also became a source of conflict between the USA and South Korea. Since Moon was opposed to the deployment of THAAD, as President, he ended up adopting an ambiguous position that was neither for nor against the agreement that had already been reached during Park’s presidency. During the process of completing the deployment of THAAD, the Moon administration attempted to maintain a balanced position between the USA and China, even demonstrating partial agreement with China, which had been staunchly opposed to the deployment. The Moon Government’s negative view on THAAD and the South Korean Government’s balancing act between the USA and China led to mistrust and suspicion about the KORUS alliance on the part of the USA. The Trump administration suspected that the Moon administration was trying to play both sides against the middle on the issue.

The possibility of combining compensation for North Korean denuclearization with economic support

The inter-Korean and North Korea–US summits agreed on establishing a peace regime and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, but is unclear which of these agreements will be implemented first. In practice, it is likely that discussions on both points will take place simultaneously, but there are slight differences of opinion between each country. North Korea is likely to seek a peace agreement with the USA prior to denuclearization, to establish a mechanism through which the USA guarantees the regime’s survival. North Korea’s position is that at the very least, the guarantee of regime survival and denuclearization should take place simultaneously. Meanwhile, although the USA is willing to discuss a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, the country insists that complete denuclearization must occur first. Of course, the USA is willing to discuss the issue of regime survival as part of denuclearization negotiations. The Moon administration believes that both denuclearization and the guarantee of regime survival should take place simultaneously, but places greater importance on establishing a peace regime than achieving denuclearization.

During denuclearization negotiations, it is possible that South Korea and the USA could have different views on the issues of lifting sanctions and providing compensation to North Korea. Since last year, the USA has made it clear that even when denuclearization talks begin, it will continue to apply pressure and maintain sanctions against North Korea until thorough verification is completed (White House, 2018). The USA will be unwilling to fulfill its end of the bargain unless North Korea makes sufficient tangible progress toward complete denuclearization.

However, if North Korea begins to implement denuclearization in phases, it will be difficult to maintain sanctions in practice. In the lead up to the North Korea–US summit, Chairman Kim Jong-un softened his previous position of “a peace agreement first, denuclearization second” with the announcement of the new strategic line policy and opened the door for partial denuclearization and a practical peace agreement to be implemented at the same time. This move is designed to pave the way for North Korea to receive a certain amount of compensation through simultaneous, phased denuclearization negotiations. It is likely that the Moon administration would agree to North Korean demands for compensation for the sake of strengthening inter-Korean relations. However, if the USA does not agree to such demands, the Moon administration may be faced with a situation
where it has to attempt to reconcile the respective North Korean and US positions right from
the beginning of denuclearization negotiations (Ha, 2018, p. 1).

Accordingly, if North Korea engages in denuclearization negotiations, and if sanctions
are lifted and the denuclearization process begins, it is likely that the country will ask for
compensation. North Korea has long believed that UN Security Council sanctions are unfair
because they were put in place largely due to US influence (Rodong Sinmun, 2016c). This is why the Moon administration welcomed Trump’s statement after meeting with
North Korean Vice Chairman Kim Yong-chol at the White House on June 2, where he
indicated that he intended to leave the issue of post-denuclearization support for
North Korea up to South Korea. The Trump Administration is willing to provide
compensation to North Korea for taking actual steps toward denuclearization, but not for
simply engaging in denuclearization talks. This means that the Moon administration’s
vision of South Korean leadership on the issue of North Korean denuclearization could
include South Korea providing the lion’s share of compensation to the North. This would be
a similar approach to that followed in the wake of the 1994 US–North Korean Agreed
Framework signed in Geneva, where the South Korean Government was responsible for
providing the majority of support to North Korea. It is likely that the Moon administration
would be willing to provide large-scale support to North Korea with the goal of bringing
about fundamental changes in the country’s economy. During the inter-Korean summit,
President Moon stated that the South Korean Government would share in North Korea’s
“self-help” efforts and provide support. The Moon Government’s New Economic Map of the
Korean Peninsula initiative could fulfill the North’s goal of inducing large-scale economic
support from South Korea. If this occurs, it would boost North Korea’s trust in the Moon
administration (Jeon, 2018, p. 1).

In practice, the international community’s sanctions against North Korea have begun to
lose momentum since the North Korea–US summit, increasing the likelihood of greater
economic support from the Moon Government. North Korea is proactively seeking greater
economic cooperation with China, and China appears willing to expand economic cooperation and various forms of support if the North denuclearizes. China has hinted that it
may be willing to provide a certain level of support even before complete denuclearization is
achieved. In addition to this, with inter-Korean and North Korea–US relations already
improved through the recent summit meetings, it would be difficult for the Trump
administration to continue to oppose South Korean support for North Korea. With dialogue
and negotiations already underway, if the issue of compensation for North Korea comes up
during the process of denuclearization talks, the Moon Government is likely to have little
choice but to take on the majority of the burden.

Seeking changes in the Cold War dynamic on the Korean Peninsula and a new
international order in Northeast Asia

Chairman Kim Jong-un has played a leading role in the rapid changes that have taken place
recently on the Korean Peninsula, while President Moon has played more of a supporting
role. Kim Jong-un took the reins through the inter-Korean and North Korea–US summits,
while the Moon Government has cooperated with North Korea to achieve its desired
outcome. Since the two Koreas largely agree on the direction of denuclearization and
establishing a peace regime, the two leaders are maintaining a cooperative relationship.
Since North Korea has no reason to resist the Moon administration’s policy of appeasement,
continued improvement in inter-Korean relations is likely. Although the USA was able to
secure itself against the North Korean nuclear threat through the North Korea–US summit,
its outcome is yet to be confirmed, depending on whether the North sticks to its promise of
denuclearization. Meanwhile, China has restored its role as a guardian of North Korea
through three summit meetings between the two countries, and laid a foundation for
taking an active role in solving Korean Peninsula issues. Through the inter-Korean and North Korea–US summits, the situation on the Korean Peninsula is moving in a direction that is favorable to China. As one of the parties to the Armistice Agreement, China appears keen to serve as an important party in establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

As North Korea and the USA seek to normalize relations, the diplomatic space available to South Korea is increasingly defined by North Korea’s choices, and the North has taken the lead in inter-Korean relations. If denuclearization takes place in accordance with the agreement between North Korea and the USA, there is a high likelihood of the KORUS alliance weakening. When discussions on establishing a peace regime begin, it could lead to a review of almost all aspects of the KORUS alliance, including the stationing of the USFK. This is likely to lead to a realignment where Japan becomes the most important ally of the USA in Northeast Asia. In addition to this, if denuclearization takes place and relations between the USA and North Korea are normalized, the USA may adopt a more neutral stance toward both Koreas. If the denuclearization process develops into a peace regime centered on the Korean Peninsula, the two Koreas would become the only parties to Korean Peninsula issues in a post-denuclearization situation. With North Korea coming out of isolation and standing at the forefront of changes in Northeast Asia, international relations within Northeast Asia are become more complicated. Efforts are stepping up to seek a new form of inter-Korean relations and a new international order in Northeast Asia to replace the existing Cold War dynamic.

A peace regime on the Korean Peninsula is only possible if preceded by denuclearization, and the agreements contained in the Panmunjeom Declaration are also heavily dependent on complete denuclearization by North Korea. The biggest question for achieving peace on the Korean Peninsula is whether it will be possible to take advantage of this denuclearization to establish systems for peaceful coexistence in a land that has been marked by mutual hostility for the past 70 years. Establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula must be accompanied by mechanisms of trust between the two Koreas, as well as the establishment of a peace regime centered on parties including China and the USA. If denuclearization takes place smoothly, it is likely that this would lead to convergence between the USA and North Korea on the issue of establishing peace. However, this process could take place alongside the institutionalization of security amongst Northeast Asian nations, as well as the normalization of North Korea–USA and North Korea–Japan relations. Accordingly, in order to solidify peace on the Korean Peninsula, an international system of peace assurance must be established with support and cooperation from all nearby countries.

There have already been several agreements on peace on the Korean Peninsula that paid dividends. The 1991 Inter-Korean Basic Agreement, 1992 Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, 1994 Agreed Framework, the 4th Six Party Talks in the late 1990s and the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement were all practical attempts to bring about peace on the Korean Peninsula. The last of these, signed by the parties to the Six Party Talks, contained a promise to hold negotiations for a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula at an appropriate separate forum. The February 13 Agreement signed in 2007 mentioned that the parties would establish a working group for the purpose of achieving a joint Northeast Asia peace and security mechanism.

If denuclearization takes place and the Cold War dynamic on the Korean Peninsula is changed, the international cooperation established to solve the North Korean nuclear issue should be used as an opportunity to seek a Northeast Asian security community. The numerous bilateral and multilateral negotiations that would come out of discussions for a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula need to form a stable international environment for lasting peace both on the Korean Peninsula and throughout Northeast Asia. In the long term, establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula should be part of a
broader process to gradually work toward a peace regime in Northeast Asia. A temporary settlement to the North Korean nuclear issue or the establishment of a peace regime that simply manages the existing division between the two Koreas would lead to unstable peace on the Korean Peninsula and leave the door open to another security crisis at any moment. For this reason, the international cooperation established to solve the North Korean nuclear issue must be utilized to resolve the Cold War dynamic that remains in Northeast Asia and creates a Northeast Asian security community.

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