

Re-emerging power politics in East Asia and peace process of the Korean Peninsula

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In 2018, we witnessed a dramatic change in the history of the Korean Peninsula, where the system of division had been shaped by colonialism, division, war and the Cold War. We hoped that it would open up the way to the dismantling of the division regime . However, to date, the prospects for establishing lasting peace on the Peninsula remain bleak.

Rather, the failure of the Hanoi summit, where no agreement was reached, and the break-down of the US-North Korea working-level talks led to North Korea's blowing up of the inter-Korea liaison office in June this year. The explosion of the office, which had been an achievement of the peace process in 2018, is a manifestation of North Korea's accumulated discontent and shows symbolically the present status of the relationship between South Korea, North Korea and the United States. At the same time, these developments indicate that we should push the stalled peace process forward.

What is needed more than anything else is to implement the Panmunjom Declaration and the Pyongyang Joint Declaration. The public was angered by North Korea's reckless act, but we should also remember that, in Hanoi, for some reason- surely, domestic politics - the Trump administration rejected North Korea's proposal for the "permanent dismantlement of the nuclear facilities in Yeongbyeon". This almost made the implementation of the inter-Korean agreements impossible. Though the Moon Jae-in government of South Korea decided to reduce this year's military budget due to the coronavirus pandemic, since taking power it has continued the introduction, development and deployment of state-of-the-art weapons, including stealth F35 jet fighters. On average, the increase in the ratio of the nation's defense budget by his government is higher than that of previous governments under Lee Myun-bak or Park Geun-hye. These policies are contradictory to the "Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjeon Declaration in the Military Domain," to which the South Korean government also agreed and praised as a de facto nonaggression agreement. We must not overlook that this attitude has increased North Korea's anger about the inter-Korea relationship.

In his speech in May this year to mark the third anniversary since taking office, President Moon Jae-in put forward the policy of “human security” encouraged by the successful control against the COVID19 . As an extension of this policy, he offered cooperation to North Korea for containing the coronavirus pandemic. However, this is not something going beyond the framework of “inter-Korean cooperation within the sanctions regime.” It is questionable whether or not North Korea would accept it. A bolder approach is needed.

Another point I want to emphasize is that, in parallel with denuclearization, the establishment of a peace system, such as the end of the Korean War, the conclusion of a peace treaty and normalization of US-North Korea relations, should be pursued. I believe this is the only realistic way to promote denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. North Korea’s consistent demand is to cease the US “hostile policies and acts” against North Korea , which includes ending military pressure and threatening behavior, such as US-South Korea joint exercises and the forward deployment of US military strategic assets, concluding a peace treaty to guarantee the defense of the North Korean regime, normalization of US-North Korea relations and easing or lifting the sanctions against North Korea.

There were times when history moved in the direction of peace, as seen in the 1994 Geneva agreement, the peace process that began in 2000, and the September 19 Joint Statement of the 6-party talks in 2005. The US-North Korea joint statement, issued at the Singapore summit in 2018, clearly says that President Trump “committed to provide security guarantees to DPRK”, and Kim Jong Un “reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

Geopolitical struggle between the US and China, which can be seen beyond regions, from East Asia, the Middle East, to the coast of Africa, has had enormous impacts on international politics in East Asia. Since Trump took office, US-China confrontation has been taking place in all issue areas , from trade and economy to technology. The pandemic has laid bare these impacts more clearly and intensified their rivalry. The situation in Hong Kong has triggered US-China confrontation even in the area of values. It would be right to say that the US and China have entered the stage of strategic competition.

The Trump administration has withdrawn from the INF treaty with Russia. It is planning to deploy intermediate-range missiles to Northeast Asia. It does not hide its intention to use the deployment to keep China in check. Russia is rushing to develop its new nuclear forces.

In East Asia, there are hot spots like the Senkaku /Diaoyu Islands, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea, where armed conflicts involving the region's nations are highly likely. Rivalries between the two powers are taking place in those flash points.

Underlying the structural cracks that divide East Asia is the legacy of the Cold War. Confrontation between the two nuclear blocs is still surviving. The Japan-US/ROK-US bloc of military alliances, which rely on nuclear weapons, on one side, is at feud with the nuclear bloc of North Korea, China and Russia. Under the Cold War structure, human security is subordinated to national security, which means human security is marginalized and historical justice, socio-economic justice, human rights, the environment and minority rights are suppressed. Since the end of the Cold War, issues that had been ignored or suppressed have begun to emerge one after another in East Asia.

In the context of the upheaval of international politics due to the end of the Cold War and the coronavirus pandemic, I want to stress that a shift from national and military security to human security, from nationalism and chauvinism to multilateral cooperation and international solidarity, growing public concern about the climate crisis and the environment, historical justice and socio-economic justice should be the tasks for us in order to overcome the pandemic and in preparation for the post-coronavirus era.

The Korean Peninsula issue is a product of imperialism, colonialism, division, war and the Cold War. Since the end of the Cold War, the Korean Peninsula has become a venue where strategic interests of the US and China have come into collision with each other. The problems of the Korean Peninsula have often been used by the Japanese government as a pretext for making itself a war-fighting country or hoisting the flag of militarism. These moves have generated a vicious circle, worsening the gap between the two countries over outstanding historical issues. The peace process of the Korean Peninsula will help lead to the disintegration of the Cold War structure in East Asia. And it must develop toward building an international order of cooperation, peace and coexistence in East Asia.

The anti-nuclear and peace movements have steadfastly pursued the principle of peace and its implementation through the resolution of disputes and conflicts by peaceful means, instead of resorting to nuclear weapons or war or military means. The driving force to transform the Korean Peninsula and East Asia into a region of peace order is a struggle for peace.