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Peace in East Asia and Korean Peninsula in the Context of Power Politics among Big Powers

Thank you for inviting me to speak at the 2022 World Conference against A and H Bombs. It has been 3 years since we have met in person face to face, but during these three years the world has undergone profound changes through the Covid-19 pandemic, US-China confrontation and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.

Henry Kissinger, ideologue of the liberal international order led by the United States of America, has expressed concern that the pandemic would be followed by an “era of walled city”. His concern has been concretized in the form of bloc confrontation by the Russian aggressive war against Ukraine waged on the pretext of NATO’s expansion and security threats. While it is unclear how this division of the world order into blocs among the US, China and Russia will evolve, it is already obvious that the liberal international order with the US on top is being shaken strongly.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a process in which a nuclear power invades another country, occupies and annexes its territory. It has reversed the course of world history to return to what it was a century ago. In addition, the belligerent Russia’s threats to use nuclear weapons could have the effect of lowering the hurdle for their actual use. Looking back on history, we note that the US referred to the use of nuclear weapons many times during the Korean War, forward-deployed these weapons in Guam and Okinawa and undertook drills simulating nuclear attacks.

After the collapse of the Cold War, successive US governments pursued nuclear arms buildup in the name of “modernization”. As we can see in the “Nuclear Posture Reviews” adopted from the Bush (Jr.) administration to the present Biden administration, they maintain the same nuclear strategy that includes “preemptive nuclear strike.” Nuclear powers such as the US, Russia, UK, France and China, instead of implementing their obligation to pursue disarmament negotiations prescribed by Article 6 of the NPT, are promoting a nuclear arms race and repeating nuclear threats. This contradiction in the non-proliferation regime is in turn causing further nuclear proliferation. This must not be overlooked.

In that sense, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) needs to be established as a solid international norm in order to stop the nuclear arms race

and achieve nuclear disarmament. The First Conference of States Parties, held in June in Vienna, demonstrated that civil society and States are capable of building together in a timely manner a solidarity front to cope with the world's pressing issues. According to former Austrian ambassador Tomas Hajnoczi, the TPNW "deprives nuclear armed states that have obstructed every attempt to bring multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations forward, their monopoly for nuclear disarmament". This means that the TPNW will allow civil society throughout the world and non-nuclear states working against nuclear weapons and for peace to take the initiative of banning and abolishing all nuclear weapons.

East Asia is at the forefront of the US-China confrontation and the theater for intricate arms race and nuclear proliferation. This is an area with a number of flash points: in Diaoyu Dao or Senkaku where, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, not only accidental military clashes but also expansionist war and its escalation are to be feared, as well as in the East and South China Seas.

Recently, NATO is becoming more and more obviously a "Global NATO" with its expansion into the Asia-Pacific. As proof, the South Korean President and the Japanese Prime Minister were invited to the NATO Summit held in June this year. The division of the Korean Peninsula is a Cold War legacy and the armistice line is called the "last dividing line of the Cold War". This dividing line is now about to cross the entire East Asia region.

Since the US-North Korea summit talks in February 2019 and the breakup of US-North Korea practical consultations in October of the same year, the road has been closed to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and establishment of a peace regime. Nevertheless, there are some points that draw our attention regarding the moves of North Korea in the last two or three years. One is the refusal of North Korea to engage in any dialogue with South Korea. Within the previous Moon administration, as well as in a corner of South Korean civil society, we frequently heard the view that the North-South axis could be restored through humanitarian exchanges for Covid-19 prevention. However, North Korea has made it clear that it has no intention of engaging in a dialogue on "non-essential issues".

Another point is that the "self-relying rehabilitation" policy that North Korea has embraced totally since the negotiations with the US and also with South Korea stalled has made some real progress. It seems therefore that the forecast that North Korea will not be able to stand much longer due to the closure of national borders and sanctions, or due to Covid-19 is wrong. It is also true that US-China confrontation and Russian aggression in Ukraine have put into relief the confrontation of the two blocs, and provide an international environment that is not all that bad for North Korea.

Above all, the most important thing is the bellicose twist of North Korean "nuclear doctrine". The statement by Deputy director of the Workers' Party of Korea Kim Yojong, the speech by President Kim Jong-un on April 26 at the military inspection ceremony

and another one on April 30 at the celebration of the creation of Korean People's Revolutionary Army, openly said that North Korea can "pre-emptively" use nuclear forces not only for "war prevention mission" but also for "basic interests", or against "all dangerous attempts and threats", and that South Korea could be the target of such use.

There is a view that the logic of "pre-emptive strike" on North Korea emerged in the period of the presidential election and administration change in South Korea, and also that Biden's "Nuclear Posture Review", which followed the usual nuclear strategic line, including pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons, influenced North Korea's change of attitude. However, North Korea declared "strengthening of nuclear forces" at the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea in 2021 and announced a five-year plan for increasing defense capabilities. I believe that we need to look at such change from the perspective of long-term strategy.

On the other hand, the Biden administration set out last year a policy targeted at North Korea called "coordinated practical approach". This policy is now turning into a second version of "strategic patience" policy. In fact, the Biden administration, while trying to manage or maintain the current status of the Korean Peninsula, seems to give priority to dragging South Korea and Japan into the multilateral framework against China and Russia. However, the status quo is not possible on the Korean Peninsula when North Korea is expected to conduct a 7th nuclear test. It would be a repetition of the failure of the Obama administration.

Even more serious is the fact that we cannot expect the South Korean government of Yoon Suk-yeol to come up with ideas, or to take the initiative for getting out of the deadlock of the process for a denuclearized peaceful Korean Peninsula. The present administration has made clear that it will observe the principle of "dealing with nuclear issue with nuclear means". It has in fact taken military measures such as forward deployment of US strategic weapons and full resumption of ROK-US joint military exercises that had been postponed or reduced in scale since 2018.

The new South Korean administration is also trying to enhance military partnership with the US and Japan by strengthening military cooperation with Japan, which is promoting the exercise of the right to collective self-defense, possession of capabilities for attacking enemy bases and increases in defense forces. It is easy to imagine that such moves will lead to consolidation of the nuclear confrontation scheme and heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in East Asia. The ROK conservative government is also using full prosecution powers to dig into and undermine all the policies related to North-South relations of the previous government. This would constitute a use of North-South relations for domestic politics. It is not an exaggeration to say that such moves represent the return to policies based on mutually assured destruction (MAD) and abandonment of the effort to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula and establish a peace regime.

Today, in 2022, I believe that it is urgent to stop all military provocations, such as nuclear testing and ICBM launches by North Korea, ROK-US joint military exercises, forward deployment of US strategic weapons and large-scale multilateral joint military exercises, if we want to prevent the intensification of military tensions and create conditions favorable for dialogue and diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula and the rest of the region.

It seems that the world order is changing from US-led unipolar to multipolar. However, a multipolar world at the mercy of power struggles among big powers and confrontation of blocs is far removed from an order of peace and symbiosis. The current situation of the world calls for the antinuclear peace movements and civil society around the globe to re-affirm the universal values on which we should be based, such as peace, antinuclear, human rights, and equality. It calls for us to resolutely stand in opposition to those forces and to moves that are contrary to these historic legacies and coordinates of humankind.

Thank you.