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## **BETWEEN NONPROLIFERATION AND REGIONAL ARRANGEMENTS: JAPAN'S POSITION IN THE CURRENT KOREAN IMPASSE**

*Hideya Kurata*

- North Korea's request to have the UN Security Council's economic sanctions lifted in return simply for the shut-down of the Nyeongbyeon nuclear facility is unacceptable. The US' non-proliferation requirements are legitimate, and the need to apply "maximum pressure" has not diminished.
- There is a certain rationality in pursuing an asymmetric deal for denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime through tripartite (North and South Korea and the US) and quadrilaterally (North and South Korea, the US and China) talks among the parties concerned with the Korean Armistice Agreement.
- The establishment of a peace regime will also have repercussions for Japan-US-South Korea security relations. Broader multilateral talks that involve Japan will bring about a more stable regional order in Northeast Asia.

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*

**1. The US' nonproliferation requirements**

The third nuclear crisis has still not ended. North Korea's denuclearization has been losing momentum since the second US-North Korea summit meeting in Hanoi failed to produce an agreement. The eventual collapse of the US-North Korea Agreed Framework that had brought about a respite in the first nuclear crisis in the early 1990s has perhaps crossed the minds of the Trump administration. That agreement, premised on North Korea freezing activity at the Nyeongbyeon plutonium-related nuclear facilities, fell apart once a highly-enriched uranium (HEU) program other than Nyeongbyeon was discovered. Kim Jong-un has asked that the UN Security Council's economic sanctions be lifted or at least eased in exchange for shutting down the nuclear complex at Nyeongbyeon. But if North Korea is running HEU programs elsewhere besides Nyeongbyeon, then agreeing to Kim's request would mean that shut-down of the Nyeongbyeon nuclear complex even while North Korea preserves its nuclear material production capability would still constitute a "denuclearization measure." With President Trump highlighting at Hanoi the presence of nuclear facilities other than Nyeongbyeon, the US request that North Korea present a list of its nuclear facilities is a legitimate nonproliferation requirement. North Korea will likely resist this request and intentionally ratchet up tensions, but it would be imprudent to give into this brinkmanship and retract the nonproliferation requirements. One element that prompted Kim Jong-un in 2018 to pledge commitment to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula was undoubtedly the "maximum pressure" of which President Trump spoke. The effectiveness of the UN Security Council's economic sanctions and military pressure comprising this "maximum pressure" should not be denied, and there is no rift between Japan and the US on the need for such measures.

**2. The rationality of multilateral discussions**

In today's nuclear crisis, as in those of the past, denuclearization is being required of North Korea, which in turn has demanded security assurances. Security assurances are declaratory measures, and in North Korea's case, they would also include the institutional measure of switching from an armistice

regime to a peace regime. Efforts to establish a peace regime took the form of the four-party talks among North and South Korea, the US and China in the latter half of the 1990s, and the Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks in September 2005 indicated agreement on North Korea abandoning its nuclear weapons program in exchange for security assurances that would cover conventional forces and a peace regime through the four-party talks. These multilateral talks were jointly proposed and realized by the US alongside other countries acknowledging the need for such talks. The four-party talks started off with a joint proposal by the Presidents of the US and South Korea, and the three-party talks in which North Korea sat down with the US and China provided the basis for the Six-Party Talks.

The need for multilateral arrangements to establish a peace regime was recognized by both North and South. While the Six-Party Talks were derailed by North Korea's nuclear testing, the October 2007 inter-Korean summit between Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong-il adopted a statement on declaring the end of the Korean War through tripartite or quadrilateral talks. Last year's Panmunjom Declaration specifically named the countries for tripartite (North and South Korea and the US) and quadrilateral (North and South Korea, the US and China) meetings. There are presently two channels for a peace regime – the US and North Korea, and North and South Korea – but, even if the North-South peace agreement being sought by South Korea was to be realized, this would not necessarily resolve the hostile relations between the US and North Korea. It is also true that the conclusion of a US-North Korea peace agreement would not necessarily bring an end to the North-South armistice. There is thus a certain rationality to establishing a peace regime through multilateral talks among the parties to the truce agreement.


### **3. Framing the regional order**

It nevertheless seems difficult to imagine that multilateral arrangements excluding Japan would bring about a stable regional order. If a peace regime was established on the Korean peninsula and the UN Command in Seoul disbanded, the US military bases in Japan currently designated as UN military

bases would forfeit that designation. In such a case, Japan, the US and South Korea would lose the mechanism by which to guarantee coordination if hostilities involving South Korea were to break out. Multilateral arrangements on the Korean peninsula can only be deemed complete if Japan is included. The normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea must be organically tied to that framework. By offering North Korea the economic incentives that would come with a normalization of diplomatic relations, Japan could provide indirect support for resolving the abductee issue as well as for abandoning nuclear weapons, and this would help to prevent a peace regime from being established while North Korea is still in possession of nuclear weapons. This will likely keep risks and costs to a minimum even if South Korea were to fall into a war after the peace regime is established. Until this is accomplished, the UN Command should not be readily dismantled.

The Trump administration no longer holds to the US' earlier stance of being willing to join with South Korea and China in propounding multilateral arrangements. Although Kim Jong-un mentioned multilateral talks in his latest New Year's Address, no announcements in response have been forthcoming from the Trump administration. That the US is proving the most passive of the countries involved is unprecedented. Multilateral arrangements, whether they pertain to the Korean Peninsula or not, are regarded by the Trump administration as a means of tying the US' hands. The experience of six-party and other multilateral talks on Korean issues has given the impression that talks have done nothing more than give North Korea more time for nuclear weapons development.

In the current bilateral talks on North Korea's denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime, the former serves as a precondition for the latter. With China and South Korea demonstrating a more conciliatory attitude than the US toward denuclearization, imposing strong nonproliferation requirements on North Korea would necessitate giving priority to bilateral talks like the US-North Korea summit meeting held in Hanoi. Japan must work in tandem with the US in insisting that North Korea comply with these nonproliferation requirements, and if a certain degree of success can be

achieved, talks on establishing a peace regime will likely become possible. While tripartite or quadrilateral talks among the parties concerned to the Armistice Agreement will likely continue to constitute the primary focus, these parties should be encouraged to broaden these talks concentrically to include Japan as well as Russia. 

*Hideya Kurata is Professor and Director at Center for Global Security, National Defense Academy of Japan.*