While the oversize personalities of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump tend to dominate global attention on the continuing efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, the peace initiative of South Korean President Moon Jae-in — the man in the middle — is increasingly pivotal to how things evolve among all of the players in this complex diplomatic drama.
Deterrence, Alliance and Peace-Keeping: An Ambivalent Peace Initiative

By Joon Hyung Kim

Given 70 years of inter-Korean tensions, the divide between conservatives and progressives in South Korean politics is deeply entrenched and has played a role in creating the tightrope that President Moon Jae-in must walk as he seeks to pursue his peace initiative. At the core of Moon’s challenge is finding a way to balance the conflicting imperatives of deterrence against Pyongyang’s threats, the goal of denuclearization of North Korea and how to move from peace-keeping to genuine peace-making. Joon Hyung Kim argues that while the challenge is great, it is not insurmountable.

THE DIVISION of the Korean Peninsula has deeply affected almost every aspect of life in South Korea, especially politics, which is sharply divided into conservative and progressive viewpoints on North Korean issues. Conservatives have traditionally adopted a hardline approach toward North Korea. Their top priority is always national security through deterrence by a strong military alliance with the United States, believing that engagement with Pyongyang is unlikely to change its behavior. They view North Korea as incorrigible and its leadership as irrational and even demonic; negotiations are considered futile and even dangerous. Regarding the nuclear issue, any option other than maximum pressure is seen as useless. They believe Pyongyang comes to the negotiating table only when it needs to buy time for cheating and driving a wedge between Seoul and Washington.

On the other end of the political spectrum, South Korean progressives favor peace and inter-Korean co-operation over eye-for-an-eye military competition. To them, peace is not a choice, but an inevitable mission to be achieved. Regarding Pyongyang’s nuclear program, progressives believe that North Korea developed the program mainly out of fear and insecurity, much of it caused by the US and the South Korea-US military alliance — in other words, deterrence itself creates an inescapable security dilemma. Progressives often argue that if North Korea is treated with less external hostility, it will negotiate on denuclearization.

Recent events in and around the Korean Peninsula have opened a path for change driven by the peace process pushed by the Moon Jae-in government. This has reignited the perennial debate between the two camps. The essence of the current debate is over the nature of a desirable security mechanism for the Korean Peninsula now and in the future. Whereas the armistice system has prevented another war and provided a minimum level of security for the Korean people, it has failed to overcome chronic tension and repeated crises that have threatened to erupt into military conflict. But efforts to promote the peace process have not yet produced sufficient security assurances. Therefore, whenever progressive governments pursue peace initiatives, conservatives jump to condemn these as dangerous attempts to jeopardize national security by weakening both deterrence capabilities and the South Korea-US alliance.

CAN DETERRENCE AND PEACE CO-EXIST?

Right after taking office, despite repeated missile launches and nuclear tests by North Korea, President Moon maintained his determination to create a peaceful and prosperous Korean Peninsula through inter-Korean dialogue. However, experts and the public in South Korea and the US worried what this might entail. Moon has been walking a tightrope between maintaining national security through a solid alliance with the US and encouraging diplomatic engagement with North Korea. This is where Moon’s peace initiative looks ambivalent. Tension is created by attempting to transform the old security mechanism based on deterrence into a new security mechanism focused on better inter-Korean relations. While Moon has emphasized multiple times that security based on deterrence should not be sacrificed by his peace initiative, the chronic ideological division in South Korea does not grant him a free pass. Remembering the grave security crisis on the Korean Peninsula in 2017 and cognizant of widespread suspicion among conservatives, Moon stressed national defense policy as South Korea’s top priority by increasing the defense budget and advancing the deployment schedules for existing weapons systems. Regardless, criticism of the progressive leadership has not died down.

This ambivalence originates from what is called the “trilemma of peace on the Korean Peninsula.” The South Korean government’s three main goals are the establishment of a peace regime, denuclearization and the continuation of the South Korea-US alliance. Two of these three goals may be achieved without much conflict, but all three cannot be achieved simultaneously without underachieving on one of them. Among these three, conservatives are definite about pursuing the latter two — denuclearization and the alliance — while progressives place a priority on the first two — a peace regime and denuclearization. That is why Moon’s peace initiative looks ambivalent, providing fodder for conservative critics.

Generally speaking, the words deterrence and peace can’t easily coexist. First of all, the roots of the words are starkly different: deterrence comes from the Latin verb terrere, meaning “terrorize,” peace comes from the Latin noun pax, meaning tranquility and quietude. Whatever impact deterrence has on peace, this mismatch demands a rather restrictive definition of peace, understood here as the absence of direct, open military conflict between two parties. Deterrence is indeed one way to contribute to peace, despite its possible negative side-effects. Undoubtedly, deterrence has provided the basic security framework for peace on the Korean Peninsula, with the armistice system surviving for almost 70 years. Without deterrence, could South Korea have experienced the stability that allowed for its massive transformation and development? Despite its huge costs, it is undeniable that deterrence has
been an insurance policy against the failure of peace through diplomacy.

At the same time, this argument could be reversed: another military conflict could instantly set back Korea’s progress by decades. Deterrence by military build-up and alliance can only be a fragile instrument with a significant downside, just like a powerful but very dangerous medicine. Deterrence provides minimum survivability, but not a stable enough peace for all people to feel completely secure. Deterrence is inherently vulnerable to security dilemmas. The Korean Peninsula is the best example, where military forces and strategic weapons are more densely deployed than in any other region of the world.

Moon’s peace initiative recognizes that strengthened security has been vital for peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, and he affirms that his government will maintain a strong military based on a solid defense posture by the South Korea-US alliance. The Moon administration aims to increase the defense budget from approximately 2.4 percent to 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). In 2018, the Moon administration increased military spending by 7 percent in response to the growing nuclear and missile threats from North Korea. Its 2019 defense budget is US$41.6 billion, an increase of 8.2 percent from 2018, the largest jump in military spending since 2008, when the budget increased by 8.8 percent.

The Moon administration’s efforts to enhance defense capabilities are not limited to military spending. They also include the procurement of advanced weapons systems directed against Pyongyang’s provocations, the early recovery of wartime operational control and advancing the schedules for existing weapons systems. Moon has highlighted the importance of bolstering joint defense capabilities between Seoul and Washington. When Moon visited the White House for a summit meeting on April 11, US President Donald Trump revealed that South Korea planned to buy a large amount of American weapons systems in the years ahead. According to local defense experts, the price tag may reach US$8.8 billion over the next five to six years.

Another key part of the Moon defense plan is the development of a three-axis system. It is composed of the Kill Chain pre-emptive strike system, the Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) system, and the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR) system. Moon’s campaign promises also included regaining wartime operational control from the US, based on the independent defense capability of South Korea.

Given the inevitable ambivalence created by the coexistence of deterrence and peace on the Korean Peninsula, pushing the peace process through denuclearization will almost certainly cause problems in the old security framework for both North and South Korea. It is understandable for this instability to create anxiety, making people reluctant to welcome a new order. Even if the status quo has many problems, it is within the range of experience and perception, and therefore bearable. Moon has an enormous burden if he is to shepherd the insecure Korean people through an uncharted area based on the conviction that it is a far better place than where we are now.

THE DIVIDE BETWEEN RIGHT AND LEFT
Can deterrence be a gateway to peace-making?

It must be, because without it, deterrence only provides minimum survival amid continuous fear. If we pursue deterrence as the goal, we will never reach the stage of peace-making. Instead, we risk the vicious cycle of a continuing security dilemma. The conservative Lee Myung-bak administration adopted this approach, and President Park Geun-hye further developed it into a highly aggressive form of deterrence. Both rightist governments were deeply skeptical about engagement with North Korea and emphasized South Korea’s alliance with the US. As soon as President Lee came to power, the 10-year pursuit of peace-making by liberal governments disintegrated. Lee wanted no part of peace-keeping as part of a process leading to peace-making. Rather, Lee revived a Cold War-type deterrence and alliance system for the sake of peace-keeping.

Unlike his predecessors, Lee did not accept the premise that improving relations with North Korea could lead to peace on the peninsula and eventual reunification. He blamed his two liberal predecessors for creating tensions in the South Korea-US alliance and made bolstering the alliance his top priority. Although Lee offered a conditional engagement policy toward North Korea, the discourse on peace almost disappeared as military deterrence dominated inter-Korean relations. Assumptions about the imminent collapse of North Korea and scenarios involving reunification through absorption by South Korea further undermined inter-Korean relations.

The hardline approach gained even more momentum when Park took office in 2013. At the end of a press conference on Jan. 6, 2014, she exclaimed that unification would be “a jackpot.” There was even talk of plans for assassinating North Korean elites. Park reportedly entreated her party members to “prepare well, since unification could come tomorrow.” The Park administration oversaw the closing down of the Kaesong Industrial Complex following Pyongyang’s third nuclear test. Park repeatedly mentioned the South Korean military’s “Decapitation [of Kim Jung Un] Operations” and “Operational Plan 5015,” both preparations for an upheaval in North Korea.

Unlike his two conservative predecessors, Moon promoted a new engagement policy toward Pyongyang. Moon’s peace vision, the...
essence of which he presented in Berlin in July 2017, called for achieving denuclearization through peaceful means. “South Korea does not wish for North Korea’s collapse,” Moon stated, “and we will not pursue unification by absorption in any form, nor will we pursue artificial unification.” He also made it clear that no military actions would be taken on the Korean Peninsula without South Korea’s consent even during that time of increased military tensions between Pyongyang and Washington.

Despite the grave situation in 2017, the Moon government saw peace as the foremost national security priority and spared no effort to eliminate the threat of war on the Korean Peninsula. As the situation deteriorated, Moon was criticized for weakening national security, hurting the alliance with the US and putting the country in danger. Against this criticism by conservatives, Moon made strenuous efforts to create a virtuous cycle based on realistic assessments: inter-Korean relations, denuclearization and US-North Korea relations must move in a synchronized fashion in order to reverse the tide of Cold War-like tensions. As a result, Moon’s peace process did not weaken or replace the deterrence system, but rather advanced it to the next level of security by adding peace as a goal. While the Lee and Park governments adopted a more aggressive deterrence strategy, the Moon government recovered the defensive aspect of deterrence in order to avoid making the security situation on the Korean Peninsula worse.

In tracing Moon’s footsteps, a picture of him as a peace-maker emerges, reminding us of Johan Galtung, a renowned peace scholar, who proclaimed that security through peace is better than peace through security. Galtung refers to the distinction between “negative peace” and “positive peace.” Negative peace refers to the absence of clear and present violence. For example, when a war is over, and a ceasefire is enacted, a negative peace will ensue. It is negative because something undesirable stopped (e.g. the violence stopped, the oppression ended). Positive peace on the other hand is filled with characteristics such as restoration of relationships, the creation of social systems that serve the needs of the whole population and the constructive resolution of conflict.

The distinction made by Galtung may be applied to Moon’s peace initiative. As examples, the prevention of inter-Korean naval skirmishes in the Yellow Sea, a moratorium on North Korea’s nuclear provocations by tightening sanctions, or strengthening South Korea’s military preparedness and the South Korea-US alliance can be considered negative peace and peace-keeping. By contrast, denuclearization through negotiations or reducing tensions through greater inter-Korean co-operation can be viewed as positive peace and peace-making. In this regard, Moon’s approach could be captured by the argument that “denuclearization through peace is a better method than peace through denuclearization.” To be sure, Moon’s peace initiative may seem to vacillate between peace-keeping and peace-making, leading some people to criticize him for saying one thing here, and another thing there. However, Moon’s peace initiative has not exclusively pursued one approach over the other. Rather, he has been trying to upgrade peace-keeping by adding peace-making measures, which has often been understood as ambivalent, and even contradictory.

SEEMINGLY AMBIvalENT, BUT ACTuALLY A ClEAR STRATEGY

As of early 2019, great achievements have been reached in a short span of time. The summit meetings between the US and North Korea are unprecedented. The three summit meetings between North Korea and the South agreed on the principle of complete denuclearization through peaceful means. Both the Panmunjom Declaration and the Singapore Declaration included historic joint commitments to establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Although negotiations stalled earlier this year with the collapse of the US-North Korea summit in Hanoi, negotiation remains a viable conclusion after military options have proved unusable. There is no other option.

The so-called top-down approach based on the personal relationships between Kim, Trump and Moon has been a driving force, which the traditional security community distrusts, especially after the February “no deal” in Hanoi. But Trump and Kim’s unconventional, sometimes experimental, approach may yet transform an almost 70-year-old armistice system based on distrust and hostility into a sustainable peace.

The peace process, however, should not be confused with the task of totally liquidating the framework of the 1953 Armistice Agreement. If the peace process advances and a peace treaty is finally signed, the legitimacy of the US presence in South Korea as a deterrent may be challenged. Considering Trump’s rhetoric about withdrawing from South Korea, the potential for replacing the Korean Armistice Agreement may lead to changes in the US forces stationed in South Korea. However, Moon has repeatedly said that the South Korea-US alliance should not be subject to inter-Korean issues. He has made it clear that the alliance would continue to be necessary even after the two Koreas sign a peace treaty ending the Korean War. Chairman Kim is also pragmatic and realistic. He has not demanded the reduction or withdrawal of US forces in South Korea, or questioned the status of the alliance, as a precondition for denuclearization.

As explained earlier, the pursuit of peace on the Korean Peninsula faces an inevitable structural trilemma involving a peace regime, denuclearization and the South Korea-US alliance. All three can hardly be achieved simultaneously. The classic peace-keeping method based on deterrence has pursued denuclearization and the alliance over the establishment of a peace regime. But Moon believes he can find effective measures to overcome this trilemma and simultaneously achieve all three goals. While deterrence remains in place, his peace initiative is actively pursuing North Korea’s denuclearization and a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula in the name of peace-making. By doing that, Moon’s peace initiative has been willing to risk being regarded as ambivalent until it produces tangible and irreversible outcomes where the two Koreas are no longer suspicious of each other’s intentions.

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