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.
Peace President

A Midterm Assessment of Moon Jae-in’s Efforts

Introduction by Guest Editors
Ajin Choi & John Delury

Few presidents had as little transition time as Moon Jae-in, who took over as president of South Korea literally the day after he won a special election, filling the void left by the impeachment of his predecessor. By that time, just over two years ago, the eyes of the world were fixed on the Korean Peninsula, with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump engaged in a volatile and dangerous back-and-forth of speeches and tweets, missile tests and military exercises. South Korea, with the most to lose, seemed to have little control over the threat of “fire and fury.”

All that changed dramatically with the inter-Korean thaw at the Winter Olympics in early 2018, marking a new era of intensive, even radical diplomacy among Moon, Kim and Trump. Hope swelled in South Korea that the tides of history were finally shifting — until the “no deal” Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi this February, when fresh doubts emerged as to whether the peace initiative championed by Moon was a “new normal,” or just a temporary aberration.

In order to step back from the blistering pace of events and get theoretical and practical insights into the Moon administration’s peace effort, the Yonsei Institute for North Korean Studies and the Korean Institute of National Unification convened leading scholars and practitioners in inter-Korean affairs as well as international experts on peace and conflict studies for a conference on April 4 this year titled “Moon Jae-in Government and Korea Peace Initiative.” This was based on financial support from the Asia Research Fund and the backing of South Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

The essays featured here are based on the April 4 conference, distilling the key findings and providing a critical assessment of the theory and strategy behind Moon’s approach, how it was devised out of lessons learned from previous failures, how it measures against the alternatives, and what might be done to improve its chances of success heading forward. We hope you enjoy reading them as much as we enjoyed working with the contributors to produce them.

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