

Chapter 6: Possible US-North Korea Dialogue with the Trump Administration and Sustainable Japan-ROK Relations

◆ North-South relations at a standstill; North Korea pushing ahead with nuclear and missile development

North Korea has defined North-South relations as a hostile bi-national relationship and expressed its position that it will not deal with the Republic of Korea (ROK). The war in Ukraine has led to a revival of the alliance between Russia and the North Korea as well as the conclusion of a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty” that includes a provision that can be seen as an automatic intervention clause (note: Russia does not officially recognize this). Pyongyang subsequently provided Russia with missiles, arms and ammunition, and even deployed troops to the front lines in Ukraine. Furthermore, North Korea has expressed support for China’s position on the Taiwan issue, even though China has distanced itself from the Russia-DPRK partnership. In this way, North Korea is using the competitive relationship between the major powers to conduct diplomacy to loosen the UN Security Council’s sanctions and monitoring regime.

In accordance with its 2021 Five-Year Plan for the Development of National Defense Science and Weapon Systems, North Korea is diversifying its nuclear arsenal, developing hypersonic weapons, operating military reconnaissance satellites, and developing means of unmanned surveillance. Behind this is the lesson of the breakdown of the February 2019 Trump-Kim Summit in Hanoi. From North Korea’s perspective, its nuclear capabilities were insufficient to bring the negotiations to a conclusion. Accordingly, Pyongyang has since been striving to strengthen its nuclear deterrence, aiming to secure deterrence against the US and a second-strike capability. Even if a dialogue takes place again under the new Trump administration, it is unlikely that Pyongyang will readily agree to denuclearization given the new realities. North Korea’s military buildup path has come at great expense to the national economy. However, Kim Jong-un, who prioritizes maintaining his regime, has no other choice; his military expansion policy will not be modified even if he gains the backing of Russia.

◆ Possibility of US-North Korea dialogue under the Trump administration and Japan’s response

The inauguration of the Trump administration could be a turning point in changing the status quo. North Korea wants a shift in the “strategic patience” that was effectively maintained throughout the Biden administration, and an excessive tilt toward Russia and China would put North Korea at risk of being incorporated into one of the major-power camps. Even if the war in Ukraine has not ended, Pyongyang will not hesitate to pursue both Russia-North Korea relations and US-North Korea dialogue at the same time. In the event of a shift to a dialogue with the US, Kim would likely demand all of the following: recognition of its nuclear power status, arms control rather than denuclearization, and normalization of diplomatic relations between the US and North Korea (including a withdrawal or reduction of US forces stationed in the ROK), all against the backdrop of its enhanced nuclear capabilities. It must be said that the hurdles to de-



APEC2024: Japan, US and ROK hold summit meeting
(Photo: YONHAP NEWS/ Aflo)

nuclearization have become higher. There is no longer any propensity among the US and ROK experts to seriously discuss the denuclearization of North Korea, and increasingly they believe that arms control and nuclear deterrence must be confronted head-on. At the same time, North Korea's tactical nuclear weapons also target US forces in Japan and the ROK as well as Guam, and even the Trump administration cannot say that a freeze on US mainland strike capabilities (ICBMs) alone would be sufficient. It is unlikely that Pyongyang will accept a comprehensive denuclearization roadmap in the first place, and the US may concentrate on risk management through gradual threat reduction on a reciprocal basis. The handling of North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles directly affects the security of both Japan and the ROK. Given the fact that Pyongyang mentioned its relations with Tokyo on numerous occasions at the beginning of 2024, it is possible that Japan is seen as a potential dialogue partner. Neither the US nor the ROK will oppose direct dialogue between Japan and North Korea. With the abduction issue at the forefront of its agenda, Japan should not pass up the opportunity to engage in dialogue with Pyongyang, regardless of the status of US-North Korea dialogue.

◆ **Yoon Suk-yeol administration's value-oriented global foreign policy and the future of improved Japan-ROK relations**

Under President Yoon Suk-yeol, who emphasizes global values, the ROK has taken the helm in promoting cooperation among the United States, Japan, and the ROK, with an eye on the Indo-Pacific region as well. It has also embarked on military cooperation with Poland and other European countries and is pursuing cooperation with NATO countries. It is now oriented toward strengthening not only the US-ROK alliance but also the UN Military Command-based security system. In addition, the April 2023 US-ROK Washington Declaration established the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) in response to domestic concerns about extended deterrence created by the war in Ukraine, and the signing of new nuclear deterrence and nuclear operational guidelines brought about greater US involvement (port calls by strategic nuclear submarines and dispatches of long-range bombers) in place of the "nuclear sharing" that the ROK had hoped for, as well as stronger deterrence against North Korea.

Regarding its relations with Japan, the ROK has taken a political risk to greatly improve relations by positioning Japan as a partner with which to pursue cooperation in security and global issues, putting such concerns as the comfort women issue on the back burner. As the threat from North Korea and the security environment in Northeast Asia become increasingly severe, it is essential to enhance Japan-US-ROK cooperation and Japan-ROK relations. The year 2025 will mark a milestone in the sustainability of Japan-ROK relations. On the other hand, the Yoon Suk-yeol administration is suffering from low approval ratings amid deepening domestic political conflict. With the 60th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations approaching, expectations are growing in the ROK for a positive response from Japan, making 2025 a turning point in determining whether Japan-ROK relations can be put on a sustainable path. In the ROK, policy toward Japan tends to be a contentious issue in domestic politics. Although President Yoon is unlikely to change policy on his own, there is always concern about "turning domestic affairs into foreign policy".

On December 2, just before this report was written, President Yoon Suk-yeol suddenly declared emergency martial law, but this had to be lifted within several hours after being rejected by the National As-

sembly. Although it is impossible to predict what will happen next, there is no doubt that ROK politics in 2025 will be tumultuous and foreign policy will stagnate. If President Yoon's ouster is confirmed through impeachment or other means, there is a possibility that the next presidential election will bring in a progressive government, inevitably having an impact on Japan-ROK and Japan-US-ROK relations.

◆ Recommendations

- US-Japan and US-ROK cooperation offers the greatest leverage against North Korea. Japan needs to convince the Trump administration that it will be beneficial to the US to manifest and implement the Camp David Joint Declaration.
- North Korea is not a top priority for the Trump administration compared to Ukraine, the Middle East, or China, but there is still time for US-North Korea dialogue to begin. It is imperative to envision a roadmap that prioritizes the elimination of nuclear and missile threats to Japan so that no deal can be made in US-North Korea dialogue without the US coordinating with its allies. It will also be necessary to draw a correlation between Japan-North Korea dialogue and nuclear and missile talks.
- The 60th anniversary of the normalization between Japan and the ROK will be a test of whether the improved relations between the two countries under the Yoon administration can be made sustainable. Efforts to institutionalize security cooperation will be important. First, Japan should begin negotiations on a Japan-ROK ACSA for Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEOs) for Japanese nationals, disaster relief, and other areas.
- President Yoon Suk-yeol's declaration of martial law and its failure have put the ROK's domestic politics into flux. With the advent of a progressive government likely, Japan must be oriented toward building relations and managing various concerns carefully, taking into account public sentiment in the ROK.

(December 6, 2024)