

Chapter 3

The Korean Peninsula

Diplomacy and Politics of Reintroducing a
State of Nuclear-Missile Crisis

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After the second summit meeting between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) ended without a joint statement, North Korea resumed missile launches to make a point to the United States: North Korea was capable of reintroducing a state of nuclear-missile crisis. Alongside this, Pyongyang has sought to entrap China into a bilateral alignment, hinting that Beijing would join the peace regime talks that have implications for the future of the US force presence. This was just over a year after the DPRK and the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) signed the Panmunjom Declaration that suggested the peace regime talks might be held without China. North Korea takes actions fully cognizant of the strategic effects generated by nuclear weapon fears on the United States and the ROK and of China's threat perception of the US forces. Against these backdrops, North Korea has undertaken steps to prevent the internal emergence of a force that would substitute Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the DPRK (Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea [WPK]). Namely, it has reaffirmed the ideology that governmental institutions are constituents of the ruling power, denying them of political neutrality on the grounds of "bureaucratism," and that people belong to "Kim Il Sung's nation and Kim Jong Il's Korea."

The ROK's Moon Jae-in administration takes the position that mutual trust and dialogue between the two Koreas are essential for establishing peace on the Korean Peninsula, and has aimed to lift sanctions and implement other measures in return for progress in North Korea's denuclearization. In the wake of the second US-North Korea Summit, the Moon Jae-in administration announced provision of humanitarian assistance to North Korea through international organizations and offered to host President Trump's meeting with Chairman Kim Jong Un at Panmunjom. Despite these efforts, no progress was made in inter-Korean relations.

Japan-ROK relations deteriorated amidst the incident of an ROK naval vessel directing its fire-control radar at a Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) patrol aircraft and the ROK government's negative action related to the hoisting of the MSDF flag at an international fleet review. In August 2019, the ROK government notified the government of Japan that it was terminating the Japan-ROK General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), but in November, announced it would suspend the expiry of the agreement. As for the US-ROK alliance, US-ROK joint military exercises have been scaled down and/

or renamed to facilitate negotiations with North Korea.

The 2018 Defense White Paper, the first defense white paper published after Moon Jae-in came to office, deleted reference to North Korea as “an enemy” and stressed readiness for “other potential threats,” thought to refer to neighboring countries other than North Korea. The ROK’s national defense budget was established with priority given to self-defense capabilities, including building a system against nuclear and missile threats.

1. North Korea: A Strategy Reliant on the Nuclear Crisis Option

(1) Maintaining and Enhancing the Diplomatic Capabilities of Military Force

Pre-nuclear weapon military force is generally thought to pose a threat to people only after it has destroyed the military force of the adversary. In contrast, nuclear weapons provide the option of directly attacking the population at large without inter-troop clashes, and based on this power to hurt, are considered effective as a coercive means for ensuring enemy leaders’ compliance.¹ North Korea does not have the readiness to wage a nuclear war against the United States, but by developing nuclear weapons, has raised alarm among people in the countries concerned. This nuclear crisis option forms the crux of Pyongyang’s foreign relations strategy.

The DPRK has taken actions that help maintain this foreign relations strategy. The first is establishment of a “denuclearization” ideology that enables North Korea to keep its nuclear stockpile. In the previous year, 2018, North Korea committed to “denuclearization” in the Panmunjom Declaration and other agreements. North Korea’s definition of “denuclearization” is likely different from non-proliferation in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). North Korea defines its phased denuclearization as aiming for “worldwide nuclear disarmament,” along the lines of the “general and complete disarmament” target in Article VI of the NPT accepted by states which are permitted to possess nuclear weapons.² If this is construed to mean North Korea will not completely abandon nuclear development until there is “worldwide nuclear disarmament,” Chairman Kim Jong Un’s “we would neither make and

test nuclear weapons any longer nor use and proliferate them” remark in his January 2019 New Year Address would mean not Pyongyang’s abandonment of nuclear development but continued retention of the nuclear option. Indeed, this New Year Address threatened resumption of nuclear development: “if the United States does not keep the promise” and it “persists in imposing sanctions and pressure against our Republic,” “we may be compelled to find a new way for defending the sovereignty of the country.”³ On April 12, a little over a month after the second US-North Korea Summit in Hanoi in late February ended without a joint statement, Chairman Kim Jong Un gave a specific deadline for retaining this option, noting he “will wait for a bold decision from the US with patience till the end of this year.”⁴

Secondly, North Korea has continued to supplement its deterrence against US preventive attacks. The diplomatic strategy of not concealing but revealing nuclear development cannot be sustained without retaliatory capabilities that can deter an adversary even without relying on nuclear weapons. The reason is: once a country finds out about an opposing country’s nuclear weapons development, a reasonable action would be to launch a preventive attack that destroys the nuclear weapons before they are completed.⁵ North Korea embarked on nuclear diplomacy for the first time in 1993, after it had deployed several multiple rocket launchers (MRL) and long-range artillery in range of the Seoul metropolitan area in the vicinity of the demilitarized zone, giving US and ROK forces a strong motive to avoid military action.⁶ If North Korea did not have retaliatory capabilities to turn Seoul into a “sea of fire,” notably MRL and long-range artillery, it would have been considerably easier for the US forces to launch a preventive attack on North Korea.⁷ The DPRK cites the US forces’ attacks on Iraq and Libya to justify nuclear armament;⁸ unlike these two countries, however, North Korea has developed nuclear weapons upon securing deterrence against preventive attacks. Following the US-North Korea meeting in Hanoi that ended without a joint statement, North Korea fired short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) and MRL to display its ability to reintroduce a nuclear-missile crisis. These launches were conducted also for the purpose of developing weapons that have adapted to the missile defenses and the base realignment of the United States Forces Korea (USFK) and supplementing North Korea’s retaliatory capabilities against ROK territory.

On April 17, 2019, not long after the remark on holding off a return to nuclear

crisis until the “end of this year,” a North Korean media outlet reported that Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the DPRK, instructed the launch of a “new-type tactical guided weapon,” which is thought to have “the peculiar mode of guiding flight and the load of a powerful warhead,” and presented “strategic goals for keeping munitions production going on and putting national defense



Missile, noted to have similarity to Russia’s Iskander, launched by North Korea on the Sea of Japan side; reported by KCNA on May 5, 2019 (UPI/Newscom/Kyodo News Images)

science and technology on cutting edge level.”⁹⁹ “Peculiar mode of guiding” suggests an ability to evade ambush by missile defenses. Analysts have noted similarities between the SRBM that North Korea actually launched on May 4 (flight distance approx. 250 km¹⁰) and the Russian forces’ 9K720 Iskander-M (range approx. 500 km; or the 9M723 export model with a range of approx. 280 km).¹¹ The 9K720 is said to be capable of maneuvering at a trajectory that makes ambush difficult by existing US missile defenses¹² (the SRBM subsequently launched on May 9 had a flight distance reaching approx. 400 km¹³).

Furthermore, two types of MRL were launched in tandem with the SRBM, the 240 mm and 300 mm systems, and reportedly had a flight distance of over 70 km.¹⁴ The 300 mm MRL is said to have similarities with China’s WS-1B¹⁵ and is thought to have a range (approx. 170 km) that reaches Pyeongtaek (US Army Garrison Humphreys), where the USFK has concentrated its facilities under recent years’ base realignment.¹⁶ Pyeongtaek had been outside the range of North Korea’s conventional MRL models and long-range artillery. North Korea later announced at the end of July that it test launched a new MRL model with a “large-caliber multiple launch guided rocket system”¹⁷ (however, this was an SRBM launch according to the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff’s analysis¹⁸). In August, North Korea said it test fired a “super-large” MRL.¹⁹ (This, too, is thought to be an SRBM²⁰ like the systems North Korea launched in September, October, and November under the same designation.²¹)

Pyeongyang’s intention to weaken the US-ROK allied force posture as examined above is consistent with North Korea urging the United States to make a decision

by the “end of this year.” Prior to the stalemate at the US-North Korea Summit in Hanoi, Chairman Kim Jong Un stated in his New Year Address: it is North Korea’s steadfast will to eradicate military hostility between the North and South and “make the Korean Peninsula a durable and lasting peace zone,” and given that the ROK agreed in the previous year to advance along “the road of peace and prosperity,” “the joint military exercises with foreign forces, which constitute the source of aggravating the situation on the Korean Peninsula, should no longer be permitted and the introduction of war equipment including strategic assets from outside should completely be suspended.” North Korea’s intent may have been to make progress on the nuclear issue at the ensuing US-North Korea Summit in order to begin peace regime consultations, and in the consultation process, weaken the readiness and deterrence posture of the US-ROK allied forces. In the New Year Address, Kim Jong Un went on to state, “It is also needed to actively promote multi-party negotiations for replacing the current ceasefire on the Korean Peninsula with a peace mechanism in close contact with the signatories to the armistice agreement so as to lay a lasting and substantial peace-keeping foundation.”²²

The SRBM and MRL launches that followed the second US-North Korea Summit were designed to remind the United States of the demands North Korea made in the New Year Address on account of the United States’ reneging on its previous year’s commitment. In the wake of the May launch, the North Korean Foreign Ministry noted that the United States had not taken measures corresponding with the actions Pyongyang had taken for “peace and stability” and that the implementation of the previous year’s Joint Statement of the first US-North Korea Summit had fallen into a stalemate, and condemned the US-ROK joint military exercise “Dong Maeng (Alliance) 19-1” as “provocative military drills.”²³ On July 16, the North Korean Foreign Ministry noted on the United States and the ROK’s attempt to conduct the joint military exercise “Alliance 19-2” and condemned the exercise as a “breach of the main spirit” of the Joint Statement. In this press statement, North Korea expressed dissatisfaction with the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) exercise held in early July with the participation of Japan, the United States, and the ROK, and once again confirmed its option of reintroducing a nuclear-missile crisis, stating, “With the US unilaterally reneging on its commitments, we are gradually losing our justifications to follow through on the commitments we made with the US as well.”²⁴

Shortly after this Foreign Ministry statement, North Korea began to publicly reaffirm its intention to further develop submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM). On July 23, the WPK official newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* reported that Chairman Kim Jong Un, during an inspection of a “newly built submarine,” unveiled “the Party’s strategic plan for the use of submarine and underwater operation” and assigned this duty to the field of national defense science. It stated that this submarine would be turned into a war asset in the near future for operation on the side of the Sea of Japan.²⁵ Satellite images showed a submarine at the facility likely visited by Kim Jong Un. The submarine appeared to be based on the Romeo-class submarine and was larger than the Gorae-class submarine supposedly used in the test firing of the two-stage “Pukguksong” SLBM. Based on the shape of the submarine, it is assumed to have a larger SLBM carrying capacity than the Gorae-class submarine.²⁶

Following the submarine inspection, North Korea continued to launch missiles as a threat to avert US-ROK joint military exercises and to prevent strategic assets of the US forces from being brought into the ROK. On July 25, a new type of SRBM (flight distance approx. 600 km²⁷) was launched, which Chairman Kim Jong Un described as “part of the power demonstration to send a solemn warning to the South Korean military warmongers” that seek to “introduce the ultramodern offensive weapons into South Korea and hold military exercises.” At this time, North Korea cited Chairman Kim Jong Un’s remark that the SRBM operates on a “low-altitude gliding and leaping flight orbit,” using more concrete language to assert Pyongyang’s capability to launch attacks by evading US-ROK missile defenses. He stressed, “It is a work of top priority and a must activity for the security of the country to steadily develop powerful physical means and conduct the tests for their deployment for neutralizing those weapons posing undeniable threats to the security of the country immediately and turning them to scrap iron at an early stage when it is considered necessary.”²⁸ On August 6, North Korea again launched the same SRBM system as a “demonstration fire.” On observing the launch, Chairman Kim Jong Un stated that it will “send an adequate warning to the joint military drill now underway by the US and South Korean authorities.”²⁹

Missiles that were subsequently launched show similarities with the United States’ Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), according to analysts.³⁰ After repeated SRBM launches, North Korea announced on October 1 that an agreement

was reached with the United States to hold working-level consultations. On the following day, North Korea fired an SLBM, the launch of which it had previously hinted at. The “Pukguksong-3” launched by North Korea on October 2 reached a maximum altitude of 900 km and flew 450 km before falling into Japan’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ).³¹ In connection with the SLBM launch, the North Korean Foreign Ministry released a statement on October 10, noting that “the DPRK can give tit for tat, but exercises restraint” in response to the United States’ testing of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), and “there is a limit to the patience of the DPRK.”³²

The WPK convened a plenary meeting of its Central Committee from December 28 to 31, ahead of the “end of this year” deadline for North Korea’s aforementioned demands that were made under threat. At the meeting, Chairman Kim Jong Un condemned that, despite the measures North Korea had taken, including halting ICBM launches, the United States had not accepted its demands, e.g., repeatedly conducting “big and small joint military drills,” the termination of which was promised by the President, and shipping “ultra-modern warfare equipment” into the ROK. Kim Jong Un vowed that North Korea will “steadily develop necessary and prerequisite strategic weapons” until a “peace regime” is established.³³ While this declaration suggests North Korea’s intention to suspend development of strategic weapons once a peace regime is established, it stops short of promising to agree to a renunciation of strategic weapons conditioned on a peace regime. Chairman Kim Jong Un reaffirmed that a strategy reliant on the nuclear crisis option would be maintained, even if the negotiations on the peace regime make progress. “Denuclearization” was already off the negotiating table with the United States, according to a statement released earlier on December 7 by North Korea’s United Nations Ambassador.³⁴

(2) China and North Korea Strengthen Bilateral Alignment via Shared Concept of “Denuclearization”

Chairman Kim Jong Un, who had begun to stress his ability to reintroduce a state of nuclear-missile crisis by launching SRBM and MRL, revealed that he received a letter with “satisfaction” from President Donald Trump of the United States (June 23, 2019) soon after Chinese President Xi Jinping returned from his first visit to North Korea. It is highly likely that Pyongyang interlinked President Xi’s first visit to North Korea with its US relations. During his visit, President

Xi “spoke highly of” “the DPRK side’s” “efforts” to “promote the denuclearization of the Peninsula.”³⁵ Comparing it with Xi’s “China sticks to the goal of denuclearization of the Peninsula”³⁶ comment, which was made over a year earlier during Chairman Kim Jong Un’s first visit to China (March 2018) that kicked off the China-North Korea summit meetings, it can be inferred that China has leaned toward affirming North Korea’s position on “denuclearization.”



President Xi Jinping of China shaking hands with Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea (right), before returning to China; June 21, 2019, Pyongyang International Airport (KCNA/Kyodo)

China’s stance a year earlier to “[stick] to the goal of denuclearization” was nothing more than an expression of neutral support for achieving non-proliferation as defined in existing international law, the NPT. Affirming a predetermined rule does not entail arbitrary decisions and choices, and therefore, represents a neutral position. Over a year later, during his visit to North Korea, President Xi Jinping “spoke highly of” “the DPRK side”—a country that was far from making non-proliferation “efforts” in conformity with the existing NPT rule. By speaking highly of “the DPRK side,” which advocates a new “denuclearization” rule that permits possession of nuclear weapons until there is “worldwide nuclear disarmament,” China was effectively siding with the political position of North Korea that is not complying with non-proliferation.

It was not without hesitation that China spoke highly of North Korea’s efforts for “denuclearization” that is not equivalent to non-proliferation. This is evident from Beijing’s incremental display of its stance at successive summit meetings with North Korea. China’s position to speak highly of such efforts grew firmer in the course of North Korea’s announcements that China would not be left out of the peace regime consultations that have possible future implications for the USFK.

Chairman Kim Jong Un attended the Inter-Korean Summit not long after President Xi Jinping expressed his neutral stance at the first China-North Korea Summit. In the Panmunjom Declaration (April 2018) released at the Inter-Korean Summit, the Chairman officially indicated the possibility of holding

“North-South-US tripartite” talks without China “for the building of durable and lasting peace mechanism.” A month after China’s exclusion was indicated (May 2018), President Xi stated to Chairman Kim Jong Un during his second visit to China that “China supports the DPRK’s adherence to the denuclearization of the Peninsula.”³⁷ Compared to its previous neutral stance, China appears to have gone a step further. However, “denuclearization of the Peninsula” was not necessarily in line with North Korea’s definition. Based on the wording, it can be interpreted that China was requesting the “DPRK side” to “stick” to non-proliferation under the NPT. The fact that a China-North Korea Summit was held even as the two sides remained in disagreement is implied by the foreign ministers’ meeting that immediately preceded it. According to the Chinese side’s announcement, North Korea stated at this meeting that it would maintain close communication with China toward denuclearization and creation of a “peace regime.”³⁸ This statement, however, was not included in the report of the North Korean state-run Korean Central News Agency.³⁹

During Chairman Kim Jong Un’s third visit to China in June 2018, President Xi Jinping stated, “Comrade Chairman has made positive efforts for realizing denuclearization,” a remark leaning closer to the North Korean position. In addition, Chairman Kim Jong Un noted, “the DPRK side hopes to work with China and other concerned parties to promote the establishment of a lasting and solid peace mechanism on the Korean Peninsula.”⁴⁰ At this summit meeting, the Chairman indicated in his own words that North Korea would not exclude China from the peace regime consultations. However, this too was disclosed only by the Chinese side’s announcement and was not reported by North Korea’s official media.⁴¹ In fact, President Xi praised the achievements of the first US-North Korea Summit before commenting on Chairman Kim Jong Un’s “positive efforts.” Thus, the Chinese President could have still been neutrally affirming North Korean “efforts” limited to those that can be agreed upon with the United States.

Following these meetings, in January 2019, when Chairman Kim Jong Un paid his fourth visit to China, President Xi at last expressed a position that was nearly identical to viewing “highly” the “efforts” to “promote the denuclearization of the Peninsula”—the remark President Xi made during his first visit to North Korea in June 2019. The difference was that the President affirmed not “efforts” but “measures.” As of January, China “spoke highly of the positive measures

taken by the DPRK side [for promoting] the realization of denuclearization on the Peninsula.”⁴² This is to say, when Chairman Kim Jong Un visited China ahead of his Hanoi meeting with US President Trump, the Chairman had already received China’s word which was closer to North Korea’s view. In his January 1 New Year Address released just prior to visiting China, Chairman Kim Jong Un, while avoiding direct reference to Beijing, stated he will “actively promote multi-party negotiations for replacing the current ceasefire on the Korean Peninsula with a peace mechanism” “so as to lay a lasting and substantial peace-keeping foundation,” “in close contact with” “the signatories to the armistice agreement,” including China. North Korea’s stance on excluding China was waning.

Though this China-North Korea meeting brought the two countries closer together, it did not lead to official media reports in North Korea that Chairman Kim Jong Un acknowledged the prospect of China’s participation in the peace regime consultations. This may have been because President Xi affirmed North Korean “measures” rather than the “efforts” he later affirmed during his first visit to North Korea in June, and “measures” may have been inadequate for North Korea. It can be logically deduced that the concrete “measures” North Korea had already taken, including nuclear test site measures, do not necessarily include the “denuclearization” ideology that does not comply with the NPT. Chairman Kim Jong Un’s interpretation may have been: only if China affirms “efforts” not limited to concrete “measures” will it mean China supports North Korea’s wish to “denuclearize” based on its unique ideology.

Indeed, it was only in June, after the Chinese President spoke “positively” of the “DPRK’s efforts” rather than “measures” that Chairman Kim Jong Un allowed media reports related to the summit meeting to directly inform the people of North Korea that China seeks peace regime consultations in tandem with North Korea. When President Xi first visited North Korea that same month, the President was able to express his view in North Korea’s *Rodong Sinmun* namely, his hope to work with the “Korean side and the related parties” via diplomatic talks and negotiations regarding “Korean issues.”⁴³

For many countries, it is not easy to express clear agreement with “the DPRK side’s” “denuclearization”—an ideology which is not based on the neutral criterion of non-proliferation under international law and which has significant room for contention. If North Korea deemed it would be effective to use its ability to approve or disapprove China’s participation in the peace regime consultations

to entrap Beijing to its side, Pyongyang may have had this foresight since the early phase of the nuclear and missile tests from 2016. From that year, China has pursued the “dual track approach” of simultaneously holding talks on the peace regime and the nuclear issue before its resolution; in other words, China elevated the order of priority of the peace regime.

China was motivated to change its stance presumably to thwart the deterrence guarantee of the US-ROK allied forces provided by missile defenses. At the time, then Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin of China, one of the first people to advocate denuclearization and peace regime parallel talks, spoke critically of the USFK’s deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System (THAAD). According to Vice Minister Liu, the deployment of THAAD by the US-ROK alliance was a case in point of “the relevant bilateral military alliances are a product of a bygone era.”⁴⁴ China allegedly imposed de facto economic sanctions on the ROK over the deployment of THAAD. More than a year later, at the end of October 2017 when the start of the meetings between North Korea and the ROK drew closer, China expressed concerns to the ROK, which was seeking improvement in relations. The concerns were related to: (1) missile defense, (2) THAAD deployment, and (3) US-Japan-ROK military cooperation. In response, the ROK reportedly explained its “public position with respect to the issues.”⁴⁵ In regard to the points noted, the ROK unveiled the “three no-policies” for maintaining or strengthening its “existing” position (the ROK would not join the US missile defense system, or develop the US-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation into a military alliance, or make an additional deployment of the THAAD system).⁴⁶ By compelling the ROK to adopt the “three no-policies” in exchange for China’s de facto mitigation of sanctions, Beijing attempted to build up economic deterrence against the US-Japan-ROK missile defense cooperation.⁴⁷

President Xi Jinping paid his first visit to North Korea just over a year after the Panmunjom Declaration in which North Korea indicated the peace regime consultations could be held without China. It recalls a situation from the previous Kim Jong Il government. North Korea suggested holding peace regime consultations without China in the Joint Declaration of the second Inter-Korean Summit (2007), and several months later, succeeded in getting China to state that the US-ROK alliance is “something leftover from the history” (May 27, 2008). This “something leftover from the history” remark from the Kim Jong Il period was reaffirmed by the nuclear diplomacy of his successor Chairman

Kim Jong Un; Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin stressed that the peace regime is prioritized because “the relevant bilateral military alliances are a product of a bygone era.” A shared threat perception toward the USFK has supported North Korea’s strategy of using the peace regime to elicit China into a bilateral alignment. As long as North Korea is the cause of many of the Korean Peninsula issues related to the peace regime, the country can select parties to the consultations for the resolution of the issues. China’s stance toward North Korea’s “denuclearization” changed incrementally the more North Korea fueled Beijing’s concerns about being left out of the peace regime consultations, which could have implications for the future of the USFK. As a result, President Xi Jinping “spoke highly of” North Korea’s “efforts” during his first visit to North Korea.

(3) The Ruling Power’s Survival Strategy Casts a Shadow on Bilateral Activities

It should be remembered that, more than five years before President Xi Jinping’s first visit to North Korea, there was an event that keenly illustrates North Korea’s distrust of China: the execution of Jang Song Thaek (uncle-in-law of Kim Jong Un) in December 2013. Around two months after the execution, Chairman Kim Jong Un (then First Chairman of the National Defense Commission) remarked on the “[failure] to detect and crush in advance the modern version of factionalist group which had formed within the Party” and went on to refer to “the August 1956 factionalist group” incident.⁴⁸ It was clear Chairman Kim Jong Un considered Jang Song Thaek an internal threat, similar to the pro-China faction (known as the “Yan’an faction”) that challenged the power of his grandfather, Premier Kim Il Sung, in the August 1956 incident. For several years after the power succession by Chairman Kim Jong Un, North Korea showed profound concerns that China doubted the legitimacy of a regime led by Chairman Kim Jong Un following the power succession. After some four years had passed since the execution, Chairman Kim Jong Un made his first visit to China in March 2018 that started the series of China-North Korea summit meetings.

Regarding the summit meeting during Kim’s first visit, a North Korean media outlet reported the Chinese side as saying, “under the leadership of Kim Jong Un the Workers’ Party of Korea would register fresh successes in steadily advancing along the socialist path,” and the North Korean side responding by requesting

President Xi Jinping's "official visit to the DPRK at a convenient time."⁴⁹ North Korea requested President Xi's visit to Pyongyang after China confirmed that its counterpart, North Korea, is a regime ruled by Chairman Kim Jong Un. Following Chairman Kim's repeated visits to China, Xi Jinping's first visit to North Korea was materialized.

The above suggests that North Korea's China policy is linked to the establishment of a "monolithic leadership" system in which there can be no leader other than Kim Jong Un—something that the regime has been working hard to create. In the August incident, powerful people influenced by an ally raised doubts over the leadership of Premier Kim Il Sung. The "monolithic leadership" system that was established after the post-incident purge eliminated all leaders other than the one and only leader. The August incident led to the withdrawal and suspension of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army stationed in North Korea,⁵⁰ which had close ties to the pro-China faction.⁵¹ As in this incident, it was seen that the bilateral alignment with China could threaten the autonomy of the regime.⁵²

"Monolithic leadership" appears to reflect North Korea's intention to eliminate not only influence from the liberal democracy of its adversary, the United States, but also the risk of North Korea's alignment partner, China, supporting an alternative leader of "socialism." This led to the revision of the Constitution in April 2019. The mission of the armed forces was revised to "defend unto death the Party Central Committee headed by the great Comrade Kim Jong Un." The previous mission of the armed forces, "defend the leadership of the revolution," demanded that the military view national defense in parity with protecting a leader of a "socialist" system. The revised mission, on the other hand, defines the duty of the military in more limited terms: national defense is equivalent to protecting not only the leader of the system but a specific leader, Chairman Kim Jong Un (Article 59 of the Constitution of North Korea).

The revised constitutional text is similar to the slogan that the North Korean regime has emphasized to the Korean People's Army (KPA) in recent years. "Let us defend with our very lives the Party Central Committee headed by the great Comrade Kim Jong Un" was underscored at several military contests North Korea held two years ago,⁵³ i.e., 2017, a year before the summit meetings with the United States and China began. Under this ideology, there can be neither a leader who has been influenced by the United States and supports liberal democracy nor

an alternative leader of “socialism” who supports China.

Preparations at the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) to revise the Constitution to include this slogan in the provisions were undertaken in parallel with North Korea’s preparations to hold the second US-North Korea Summit in Hanoi in February 2019. At the summit meetings with China before and after it, the DPRK reaffirmed the general principle of “the two parties and two countries” cooperation.⁵⁴ This is not confined to the “countries,” China and North Korea, having a shared perception of the military threat of the United States. Cooperation between “two parties,” both of which have a “one-party system” that competes with the United States’ liberal democracy, strongly hints at a bilateral alignment for the domestic goal of regime survival. However, while North Korea required such an alignment, it had to first rule out the possibility of China using the alignment to encourage the emergence of an alternative leader.

This is suggested by a document released by the Central Committee of the Democratic Front for the Reunification of Korea, a propaganda organ of the WPK, around the time that Chairman Kim Jong Un left for the US-North Korea Summit in Hanoi. According to this document to arouse interest in the upcoming election of deputies to the SPA, North Korea manifests “people-centered philosophy,” stating that power organs “always put people’s interest above everything.” The document urged people to engage in a struggle with “bureaucratism” that infringes the “socialist system.”⁵⁵ In North Korea, criticisms of “bureaucratism” are made to instill the notion that engaging in the professional duties of organizations is equivalent to subordination under a specific leader. It originated from criticism of “*military* bureaucratism” (italics added by author). Ever since pro-China and pro-Soviet factions were removed in the August incident, Chairman Kim Jong Un’s father, Kim Jong Il, Chairman of the National Defense Commission (1969 when he was Chief of the WPK Propaganda and Agitation Department; a few years before he was nominated as successor of President Kim Il Sung), lodged criticisms of “bureaucratism” in purging potential forces that could replace the regime leader. Chairman Kim Jong Il mentioned such criticisms in his address, in order to ensure that military personnel do not protest against the functional strengthening of the General Political Bureau, an organ to monitor the military on behalf of the WPK Central Committee.⁵⁶

Criticizing “military bureaucratism” in the context of strengthening the General Political Bureau was nothing else but denying the professional autonomy

of military organizations from politics. The WPK propaganda organ lodged criticisms of “bureaucratism” rooted in criticisms of “military bureaucratism,” and proclaimed that military organizations should “always put people’s interest above everything.” The intention was likely to establish the ideology that organizations such as the military are subordinate only to Chairman Kim Jong Un, the one and only leader who represents the “people.” Indeed, the aforementioned advertisement message for the SPA election interweaved extolment of “Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism” and “dear respected supreme leader Kim Jong Un.”⁵⁷ Veneration for not only “socialism” but also “Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism” greatly suggests a system of political control that removes even “socialist” leaders other than Chairman Kim Jong Un. It can be conceived that the regime maintains strong wariness toward the autonomy of military organizations under the name of “bureaucratism.”

Around the timing of the US-North Korea Summit in Hanoi, the *Rodong Sinmun* published a long article recalling Chairman Kim Jong Un (Marshal of the DPRK) who was out of the country. “We Miss You, Our Dear Marshal,” the article said, spreading the notion that the Chairman was the one and only leader. According to this article, “the world witnesses the noble traits of Korean people who follow their leader only, reposing absolute trust in him.”⁵⁸ This article, along with the election management committee’s announcement made immediately after the Chairman’s return to North Korea informing the status of the election of deputies to the SPA,⁵⁹ advanced the view that the people belong to “Kim Il Sung’s nation and Kim Jong Il’s Korea.” As long as the nation and Korea seek identity from Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il, there can be no “socialist” system other than the Kim Jong Un regime.

Alongside this, North Korea has made it clear in its negotiations with the United States that it rejects US-style liberal democracy. In early March, shortly after returning from the US-North Korea Summit in Hanoi without a joint statement, Chairman Kim Jong Un sent a letter to the National Conference of Party Primary Information Workers. In the letter, Chairman Kim Jong Un stated that “primary information workers” must strengthen “ideological education” to protect “the Party and the state” from “imperialists and class enemies.”⁶⁰ Chairman Kim Jong Un expressed similar views regarding internal control in his January 1, 2018 New Year Address, immediately before calling for North-South dialogue and engaging in the negotiations. In his address at the conference of WPK

cell chairpersons held at the end of December of the previous year, Chairman Kim Jong Un noted the importance of “education by party organizations” that promotes party-wide “Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism” and stated that the United States and other countries seek to spread “non-socialist practices” in North Korea.⁶¹ North Korea embarked on negotiations with the ROK and then with the United States upon confirming denial of US-style liberal democracy. Chairman Kim Jong Un reconfirmed this view following the US-North Korea meeting in Hanoi.

As was touched upon above, the conference of the party information workers vowed to promote the ideology of “the Party and the state,” in other words, viewing and protecting the party system in parity with the state. Following the conference, activities consistent with this were observed within the military. In the same month as the conference of primary information workers, the 5th Meeting of Company Leaders and Political Instructors of the KPA was held under the leadership of Chairman Kim Jong Un. The meeting debated military-wide “Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism” under the “Korean nation-first principle” and reaffirmed national defense and subordination to political leaders.⁶²

In the following month, April, the Constitution was revised at the SPA, making the national defense duties of the armed forces equivalent to defending political forces and a specific leader, i.e., the role of “defend unto death the Party Central Committee headed by the great Comrade Kim Jong Un.” In his policy speech at the SPA, Chairman Kim Jong Un emphasized the nuclear crisis option, saying he “will wait for a bold decision from the US with patience till the end of this year,” and at the same time, condemned “bureaucratism,” or organizational autonomy of the armed forces.⁶³

According to the remarks of Chairman Kim Jong Un, the simultaneous launches of SRBM and MRL in May were based on the “party’s five-point policy of training revolution,”⁶⁴ and the submarine believed to operate SLBM that made an appearance in July was designed “to be capable of fully implementing the military strategic intention of the Party.”⁶⁵ The “five-point policy of training revolution” was a set of guidelines deemed necessary at the aforementioned meeting of company leaders by the head of the KPA General Political Bureau for “strengthening [army-wide] companies into elite combat ranks devotedly defending the Party Central Committee.”⁶⁶ North Korean discourse associated with missile and other launches repeatedly contained what was not necessarily

consistent with the military rationality of the nation, requesting armed forces to act in the interests of a specific political leader.

2. South Korea: Outlook of Inter-Korean Relations and Japan-ROK Relations

(1) A Yearning for Improved Inter-Korean Relations and US-North Korea “Intermediation”

Though the US-North Korea negotiations on “denuclearization” reached a stalemate, the Moon Jae-in administration of the ROK continued to make efforts to improve inter-Korean relations aimed at easing military tension on the Korean Peninsula.

The Moon Jae-in administration places importance on mutual trust and dialogue between the two Koreas for building permanent and stable peace on the peninsula, and named the negotiations on North Korea’s “denuclearization” since 2018 “the peace process on the Korean Peninsula.”⁶⁷ To move this process forward, the ROK has taken steps to enhance relations with North Korea, including reducing conventional forces along the South-North Military Demarcation Line as agreed upon in 2018 and working toward providing returns corresponding with progress made in North Korea’s denuclearization.

After the second US-North Korea Summit in February ended without an agreement, President Moon Jae-in squeezed in an impromptu one-night, three-day visit to the United States and held a US-ROK Summit with President Trump in April, cancelling his scheduled attendance at a ceremony commemorating the

100th anniversary of the founding of the Provisional Republic of Korea Government. At the meeting, regarding the “denuclearization” method, the United States expressed its wish for a “big deal (complete denuclearization in exchange for the lifting of sanctions),” to which the ROK proposed a “good enough deal (dismantlement of Yongbyon



US, ROK, and North Korean leaders meeting in Panmunjom (KCNA/Kyodo)

facilities in exchange for the lifting of some sanctions, such as South-North economic cooperation).” Had the United States agreed to the “good enough deal,” the ROK had reportedly intended to pursue further Inter-Korean Summits and US-North Korea Summits.⁶⁸ However, it appears the ROK did not receive the US response it had hoped for. With regard to South-North economic cooperation, the United States appears to have accepted the ROK’s humanitarian assistance to North Korea but objected to the ROK’s wish to resume operations at the Kaesong Industrial Complex and resume the Mt. Kumgang Tourism Project. Following this, the Ministry of Unification announced that the ROK government would provide humanitarian assistance worth \$8 million to North Korea through international organizations, such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).⁶⁹ In addition, the Ministry of Unification approved a visit to North Korea by businesspeople and others who had operated plants at the Kaesong Industrial Complex, noting that the visit would be made to inspect facilities, denying direct relationship with resuming operations.⁷⁰

Thereafter, the Moon Jae-in administration invited President Trump to visit the ROK on the occasion of the G20 Summit in Osaka in June and materialized President Trump’s meeting with Chairman Kim Jong Un in Panmunjom. At the meeting, President Trump invited Chairman Kim Jong Un to the United States, and the two sides agreed to resume working-level negotiations in two to three weeks’ time.⁷¹

As it turns out, as was mentioned in the previous section, the US-North Korea working-level consultations were not held until October. Furthermore, North Korea began to not show a positive response despite the ROK’s appeasing approach, seeming to indicate a rupture in inter-Korean relations. Even the ROK’s offer to provide 50,000 tons of domestic rice through the WFP as humanitarian assistance was rejected by North Korea.⁷² In December, the ROK government decided to provide \$5 million in humanitarian assistance through the World Health Organization; however, it is unclear whether North Korea will accept this assistance.⁷³ While the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain, agreed upon between the South and North defense ministers in September 2018, was implemented to a great extent in 2018, there still remain unachieved commitments, namely: consultations concerning the composition of the Inter-Korean Joint Military

Committee, a core part of the South-North military confidence-building; and freedom of movement for visitors and tourists in the Joint Security Area in Panmunjom, which would mark a symbolic step.⁷⁴

(2) Adjustments in Japan-ROK Relations and the US-ROK Alliance

A succession of negative actions by the ROK side has deteriorated Japan-ROK relations. The recent downturn in relations was fundamentally caused by the decision of the Supreme Court of the ROK ordering payment of compensation to “former civilian workers from the Korean Peninsula.”⁷⁵ The official view of the executive branch of the ROK had been that the issues, including payment of compensation to “former civilian workers from the Korean Peninsula,” have been settled, as was set out both during the process of the negotiations of the Agreement on the Settlement of Problems concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Co-operation between Japan and the ROK—one of the agreements incidental to the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the ROK concluded when relations were normalized in 1965—and in the conclusion reached by the Public-Private Joint Committee established during the Roh Moo-hyun administration in 2005 and whose meetings were also attended by the incumbent President Moon Jae-in.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the judicial branch denied this view. The President of the ROK is the chief executive who leads the executive branch and shall represent the State vis-a-vis foreign states as the Constitution of the ROK stipulates.⁷⁷ It follows that, should differences in opinion arise between the judicial and executive branches, the President shall be responsible for settling those differences. The President, however, pushed for separation of powers and the “victim-centered approach” and has de facto neglected the issue. Moreover, notwithstanding the government of Japan’s repeated requests for diplomatic consultations and establishment of an arbitration board under the Exchange of Notes concerning the Settlement of Disputes, which is included in the agreements incidental to the Treaty on Basic Relations, the ROK did not provide a substantive response.⁷⁸

Distrust between the defense authorities of Japan and the ROK was further incited by an incident that occurred in October 2018: an MSDF destroyer was asked not to raise its flag (the Rising Sun Flag) during an international fleet review hosted by the ROK and cancelled its participation. The Rising Sun Flag was not raised as an issue by the ROK when it hosted an international fleet review

in 1998 and 2008.⁷⁹ Later, when an explanation of the Rising Sun Flag was published on the website of the Japanese Foreign Ministry,⁸⁰ the ROK Foreign Ministry issued an objection statement saying that the Rising Sun Flag is “a symbol of militarism” and that Japan must face up to its history. In addition, the ROK National Assembly adopted a resolution seeking the International Olympic Committee and the Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games to ban people from bringing the Rising Sun Flag to the Game venues.

In particular, the incident of an ROK naval vessel directing its fire-control radar at an MSDF patrol aircraft, which became a dispute between Japan and the ROK from December 2018 through 2019, further fueled Japanese defense authorities’ distrust of the ROK. On December 20, 2018, an incident occurred in which the ROK Navy’s destroyer *Gwanggaeto-daewang* directed its fire-control radar (STIR-180), which is used prior to attacks, at an MSDF P-1 patrol aircraft that was flying over Japan’s EEZ. In response, Japan lodged a protest and requested the prevention of recurrence to the ROK. The two sides held consultations between diplomatic authorities and working-level consultations between defense authorities but could not reach a shared opinion. Japan released footage taken from the P-1 patrol aircraft that included audio from inside the aircraft at the time of the fire-control radar irradiation.

The ROK has fully denied the fire-control radar irradiation, disclosed footage claiming that the MSDF P-1 patrol aircraft conducted “a threateningly low-altitude flight” toward an ROK destroyer engaged in a humanitarian rescue mission for a boat in distress, and requested an apology.

Subsequently, the second bilateral working-level consultations between defense authorities were held; however, the consultations once again failed to achieve an agreement regarding matters such as the method of confirming the facts of the fire-control radar irradiation. Japan then released the fire-control radar detection sound from the time of the incident.

The Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) adopted in 2014 at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) by 21 countries, including Japan and the ROK, stipulates that aiming fire-control radars is an action a commander might generally avoid. Furthermore, the ROK destroyer did not provide any response to the wireless inquiries concerning the fire-control radar irradiation made by the MSDF P-1 patrol aircraft using three types of frequencies, which, too, constitutes an unprofessional action that breaches the custom of the sea.

In contrast, the ROK's claim of "a threateningly low-altitude flight" toward a destroyer has no applicable objective standards. As has been announced by Japan, the flight method of the MSDF patrol aircraft conforms to the Convention on International Civil Aviation, which military aircraft are not obliged to comply with, and had been implemented daily for many vessels including ROK naval vessels.⁸¹

At the abovementioned second working-level consultation, the ROK asserted, "if the subject of the threat feels threatened, it is then a threat." On January 24, at the Navy Fleet Command, Minister of National Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo instructed the Navy to take "stern actions against threatening flybys." If the ROK felt threatened by an MSDF patrol aircraft's daily monitoring and surveillance activity, then the incident may not have been merely an incidental localized event; as discussed later, it may be hinting at changes in the threat perception of the ROK that is in a reconciliation phase with North Korea.

With regard to relations between Japanese and ROK defense authorities, Japan, the United States, and the ROK agreed to promote trilateral security cooperation at their defense ministerial meeting in June. Meanwhile, in July, Japan updated its licensing policies and procedures on exports of controlled items to the ROK, based on security concerns, and the ROK lodged a major protest. As can be seen from recent years' official documents (see Table 3.1), there has been a clear deterioration in Japan and the ROK's perception of each other's strategic importance and level of shared values, and this divergence has begun to have ripple effects on security cooperation.

Japan's update of export licensing policies and procedures drew a series of critical responses from the ROK.



Prime Minister Abe Shinzo greeting President Moon Jae-in at the G20 Summit venue; June 28, 2019, Osaka City (Reuters/Kyodo)

For example, the ruling party of the Moon Jae-in administration, the Democratic Party of Korea, established the Special Committee to Respond to Japan's "Economic Invasion" within the party. In addition, then Senior Secretary for Civil Affairs Cho Kuk of the Office of the President (later appointed Minister of Justice),

Table 3.1. Changes in each other's perception observed from Japanese and ROK official documents

Year	Japan		Republic of Korea	
	Defense of Japan	Diplomatic Bluebook	Defense White Paper	Diplomatic White Paper
2014	Extremely vital Fundamental values Strategic interests as allies	Fundamental values Most important neighboring country	Fundamental values	Values Interests
2015	Extremely vital Strategic interests as allies	Most important neighboring country		Values Interests
2016	Strategic interests Extremely vital Strategic interests as allies	Strategic interests Most important neighboring country	Fundamental values	Values Interests
2017	Strategic interests Extremely vital Strategic interests as allies	Strategic interests Most important neighboring country		n/a
2018	Future oriented	Future oriented	Partner	Future oriented
2019	Negative actions by the ROK side	Negative moves by the ROK		Future oriented

Note: The phrases similar in meaning are shown in the same color.

Source: Compiled by the author based on the documents.

who is a close associate of President Moon Jae-in, gave momentum to anti-Japanese sentiments, stating that the Japanese measure recalls the “Bamboo Spear Song” about resistance to the Imperial Japanese Army during the Donghak Peasant Revolution and asserting that anti-Japanese was patriotism. President Moon stated, “We will never again lose to Japan,” at an emergency cabinet meeting that was broadcast live for the first time.⁸² A pamphlet with a similar title was also published.⁸³ Among the people, there were widespread campaigns to boycott Japanese products and refrain from traveling to Japan.

In response to this growing public opinion, the Office of the President of the ROK announced on August 22 that it would terminate GSOMIA before the annual extension deadline. Regarding the reason for GSOMIA's termination, the

ROK stated that the government of Japan brought about “fundamental changes to the environment for security cooperation between the two countries” by removing the ROK from the so-called list of “white countries,” and therefore, the ROK “decided that maintaining this Agreement, which was signed to facilitate the exchange of sensitive military information, does not serve [its] national interest.”⁸⁴

While the Japan-ROK GSOMIA is a bilateral agreement, it was considered to epitomize the strengthening of security cooperation mechanisms to deal with North Korean threats by Japan, the United States, and the ROK—comprised of Japan-US and US-ROK alliances and Japan-ROK cooperation. Thus, following the ROK’s notification of GSOMIA’s termination, a senior US official repeatedly expressed “disappointment,” and the importance of the trilateral security cooperation was confirmed at the Japan-US-ROK defense ministerial meeting.⁸⁵ Against this backdrop, on November 22, approximately six hours prior to GSOMIA’s termination, the government of the ROK suddenly announced suspension of the expiry of the agreement. In conjunction, the government announced it would suspend its WTO dispute complaint over Japan’s update of export licensing policies and procedures.

At the same time, it is hard to say that the US-ROK alliance has strengthened. In order to facilitate “denuclearization” negotiations with North Korea, following on from 2018 the two countries continued to downscale US-ROK joint military exercises, which are essential for maintaining the readiness of the rotationally deployed USFK and the ROK armed forces. The Key Resolve (KR) exercise was renamed the “Dong Maeng (Alliance) 19-1” exercise, and the Foal Eagle (FE) exercise was conducted throughout the year among small units.⁸⁶ The Ulchi Freedom Guardian (UFG) exercise was named “Alliance 19-2”; however, in response to protests from North Korea, “Alliance” was deleted, and it was reportedly named “ROK-US Combined Command Post Training in the Second Half of the Year.”⁸⁷

This exercise assessed the Initial Operational Capability (IOC) of the future ROK-US Combined Forces Command (a General from the ROK armed forces will serve as the commander, and a US force personnel will serve as deputy commander), the command structure following the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON), which the ROK aims to achieve at an early date.⁸⁸ In the Joint Communiqué of the 51st ROK-US Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) held

on November 15, it states that the IOC assessment results were reported to the defense ministers of the two countries and that they agreed to proceed to the step of assessing Full Operational Capability (FOC) for the future ROK-US Combined Forces Command in 2020.⁸⁹

As for US-ROK combined air force exercises, Vigilant Ace was not conducted in 2018, and its postponement was announced in November 2019. US and ROK air forces had planned to carry out exercises involving squadrons or smaller units; some analysts construe that such exercises were in the end postponed out of consideration for North Korea's protests.⁹⁰

In 2019, the United States and the ROK held negotiations for concluding the 11th US-ROK Special Measures Agreement (SMA), which determines the defense costs shared between the two countries in 2020 and beyond. The previous 10th SMA consultations broke down in 2018. The conclusion of the agreement was delayed to 2019, and moreover, its effective duration was one year. In the 11th SMA negotiations, the United States demanded an increase in the ROK's cost share by approximately fivefold. The cost reportedly included that of dispatching strategic assets of the US forces and conducting US-ROK joint military exercises. The ROK objected that such costs are outside of the SMA framework.⁹¹ The 11th SMA negotiations were held five times in 2019, but like 2018, failed to reach a conclusion by the end of the year.

As regards ROK-China relations, the souring of US-China relations has occasionally forced the ROK to choose between the United States and China in both the security and economic domains. In October 2017, the ROK announced to China that it was not considering additional deployment of THAAD, that the ROK will not join in the US missile defense system, and that the Japan-US-ROK security cooperation will not develop into a trilateral military alliance. It was believed that the THAAD issue had been shelved due to the announcement. However, recent developments, such as the raising of the issue at the ROK-China Summit held twice in 2019 and the statement in the Chinese defense white paper that THAAD has severely undermined the regional strategic balance in the Asia-Pacific, suggest that THAAD may re-arise as an issue.

In addition, to keep the ROK in check, which launched 5G service using base stations made by the Chinese company Huawei, US Ambassador to the ROK Harry Harris said in a speech that it is important for South Korean companies to choose "a trusted supplier" from a security perspective. The Office of the

President of the ROK responded that its 5G networks are separated from its military security communications network and have no impact. The remarks nonetheless suggest that the US-China competition in the economic domain might have implications for the ROK as well.

(3) The Start of Defense Reform 2.0

The Moon Jae-in administration has entered its third year. In 2018, it unveiled a national defense reform basic plan (Defense Reform 2.0) and embarked full scale on the national defense reform vision of the administration. The first defense white paper published under the Moon administration, 2018 Defense White Paper (released January 2019), deleted reference to North Korea as “an enemy” and broadened the threats to be addressed by the ROK from “North Korean nuclear and missile threats” to “omnidirectional security threats.” It stressed readiness for “other potential threats,” thought to refer to neighboring countries other than North Korea. In the address by President Moon Jae-in at the 71st Armed Forces Day event held at an air force base in Daegu, the President did not make reference to North Korean threats or nuclear threats as in previous years.⁹² As was noted earlier, if the ROK felt threatened by an MSDF patrol aircraft’s daily monitoring and surveillance activity, then it indicates a change in the ROK’s threat perception and the situation may be more serious for Japan-US-ROK cooperation. This observation is substantiated by the ROK armed forces’ renaming of the “Dokdo Defense Drills” held annually in waters surrounding Takeshima to “East Sea Territory Protection Exercise” immediately after the announcement of the termination of the Japan-ROK GSOMIA, and the doubling in scale of this training from previous years.

The Mid-Term Defense Plan for 2020–2024 appropriates 290.5 trillion won in total for the overall national defense budget for 2020 to 2024, equivalent to an average increase of 7.1% a year. The budget reflects the priority placed on self-reliant national defense capabilities, with improving defense forces having an even higher annual average increase of 10.3%, including building a nuclear and missile threat response system that will replace the existing “three-axis system” excluding offensive aspects.⁹³ The government’s FY2020 national defense draft budget includes a budget for technology development related to the multipurpose large transport vessel (LPX-II) to be carried by short takeoff and landing aircraft, as mentioned in the Mid-Term Defense Plan for 2020–2024. The ROK explains

that this vessel will be introduced to improve capabilities for protecting maritime interests in waters surrounding the Korean Peninsula and in open sea.⁹⁴

On the other hand, Defense Reform 2.0 calls for troop reduction from the current number of around 600,000 to 500,000 by 2022, aiming to consolidate and curtail standing troops against the backdrop of a declining birthrate and other factors. However, 2019 saw incidents that may be attributable to personnel shortages and slackening of military discipline. They include delay in the initial response to a wooden boat that sailed to Samcheok Port on the side of the Sea of Japan for defecting purposes even though the boat had docked at the port,⁹⁵ and a false report by the military upon failing to catch an unidentified person on the premises of the Second Fleet Command in Pyeongtaek.⁹⁶

In the area of human resources, the ROK has taken steps to increase the number of civilian officers at the Ministry of National Defense. For example, whereas nine of the 22 director-general level posts were filled by nine civilians (not including generals on reserve) in 2017, they were filled by 17 civilian officers by the end of 2018. Additionally, a female officer was promoted to major general for the first time and appointed commander of Aviation Operations Command. An air force general was also appointed commander of the Defense Security Support Command for the first time rather than an army general, breaking a custom that had been in place since the days of its precursor, the Defense Security Command. In this manner, the ROK has continued to make breakthroughs in human resources.

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