



The inter-Korean joint liaison office (foreground) in Kaesong blown up by North Korea (KCNA/Kyodo)

Chapter 3

The Korean Peninsula

Wavering North-South Relations

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Summary

On March 3, 2020, a day after the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) fired the first of a series of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs), it denounced the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) for considering its alliance with the United States dearer than its own countrymen. In June, through statements by Kim Yo Jong, first vice department director of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), the North pressured the South to correct its "flunkeyism," or subservience to the United States. North Korea's external actions were not directed at DPRK-U.S. relations, which had an uncertain future with the coming American presidential election. According to the DPRK's Foreign Ministry, the United States should not interfere in inter-Korean relations because it is an internal ethnic issue of the Korean people. Meanwhile, North Korea adopted the stance that it might back down from elevating tensions if "flunkeyism" was not corrected. This included imposing on South Korea the option of abrogating the agreement in the military domain, which was announced at the 2018 inter-Korean summit, and blowing up the inter-Korean joint liaison office. Prior to the inauguration of the new U.S. administration, North Korea focused on withdrawing the ROK from its cooperation with the United States.

The Moon Jae-in administration in South Korea was strongly resolved to improve inter-Korean relations following North Korea's actions and appeared to distance itself from the United States. For example, South Korea has been engaged in a growing debate about limiting the discussion matters at the U.S.-ROK working group for coordinating the two countries' policy toward North Korea, and promoting cooperation with the North more autonomously. Furthermore, the Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) sea-based ballistic missile interceptor, a component of the missile defense system, was not mentioned in the Mid-term Defense Plan released in August. Although the Navy insisted on the need for a multilayered defense system to cope with North Korea's development of SRBMs, the SM-3 was not adopted for this purpose. On the other hand, the ROK vowed to become "a nation that cannot be shaken" and to achieve "complete missile sovereignty." By relaxing the U.S.-ROK missile guidelines, which was a framework with the United States to restrict missile development by South Korea, the ROK demonstrated readiness to expand its missile capabilities. No significant progress was made in the transfer of wartime Operational Control (OPCON) Authority, a priority of the Moon Jae-in administration, and this will be a focal point of U.S.-ROK relations under the new U.S. administration, along with the unresolved issue of host nation support.

1. Inter-Korean Relations Spearheaded by North Korea

(1) North Korea's Threats

On June 4, 2020, First Vice Department Director of the WPK Central Committee Kim Yo Jong, the supposed younger sister of Kim Jong Un, chairman of the WPK (chairman of the State Affairs Commission), issued a statement condemning the distribution of anti-North Korea leaflets by North Korean defectors. (Although Chairman Kim assumed the post of general secretary of the WPK at its Eighth Congress on January 10, 2021, this chapter covers events up to the end of 2020 and uses "Chairman Kim," his title as of 2020.) In the statement, Kim Yo Jong noted that the distribution of leaflets was a violation of the Panmunjom Declaration (April 27, 2018) signed by President Moon Jae-in and Chairman Kim, in which they agreed to completely cease all hostile acts including broadcasting through loudspeakers and distribution of leaflets, and warned that North Korea would abrogate the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain (September 19, 2018) that was reached between North and South Korea for implementing the Panmunjom Declaration.¹ Gradually, North Korea's demands shifted to correcting South Korea's "flunkeyism" (meaning the habit of being subservient to a great power).² A statement by Kim Yo Jong, published in the June 17, 2020 edition of the *Rodong Sinmun*, expressed loathing for the message delivered by South Korean president Moon Jae-in on the 20th anniversary of the South-North Joint Declaration (June 15, 2000), criticizing that the message reflected "deep-rooted flunkeyism." Kim's statement singled out the U.S.-ROK working group on North Korean affairs and rebuked South Korea's stance toward the United States: "It is a tragedy produced by the persistent and deep-seated pro-U.S. flunkeyism and submission of the South Korean authorities that the North-South ties reduced into the plaything of the U.S."³ It suggests that the ceasing of loudspeaker broadcasting and leaflet distribution themselves were not necessarily North Korea's main purpose in condemning the ROK's

"flunkeyism." In other words, North Korea's demand was for South Korea to withdraw its cooperation with the United States. When a U.S. State Department spokesperson expressed concern over the situation to the ROK media,⁴ Kwon Jong Gun, director general of the Department of U.S. Affairs of the DPRK Foreign Ministry, issued a statement rebutting that the United States had no right to interfere in North-South relations, which were "the internal affairs of the Korean nation from A to Z."⁵

It could be thought that North Korea raised issues of loudspeaker broadcasting and leaflet distribution as a starting point for imposing demands on South Korea and creating conditions which would force the ROK to accept them in negotiations with the South. Such North Korean attempts date back to at least 2015. In August 2015, the two Koreas issued a Joint Press Statement aimed at ending tensions between North and South Korea along the Military Demarcation Line (MDL). The version of the statement released by North Korea stated that the ROK would stop loudspeaker broadcasts and the DPRK would "lift the semi-war state at that time."⁶ It can be construed that North Korea would cease actions which heighten military tensions on the condition that South Korea ceases loudspeaker broadcasting. On the other hand, the wording "at that time," which gives rise to such an interpretation, was not included in the version released by the ROK.⁷ If North Korea had intended to make the cessation of loudspeaker broadcasting a condition in exchange for the lifting of the semi-war state, the Park Geun-hye administration would not have accepted it at that time.

In contrast, the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration committed both the North and South to cease hostile acts, including loudspeaker broadcasting and leaflet distribution. It made it possible to assert that ceasing such hostile acts was a prerequisite for North Korea to avoid military tensions (according to Article 2.1 of the Panmunjom Declaration, the two Koreas, for the present, have an obligation to cease all hostile acts, including broadcasting through loudspeakers and distribution of leaflets, in order to alleviate the military tension and eliminate the danger of war on the Korean Peninsula).⁸ Because the DPRK acquired the

latitude to make such an interpretation of the Panmunjom Declaration, certain legitimacy was given to the North's insistence that South Korea would be made to pay a price for violating "the articles of the Panmunjom Declaration and the agreement in the military field in which both sides agreed to ban all hostile acts including leaflet-scattering." That was seen in the aforementioned statement of First Vice Department Director Kim Yo Jong. In the statement, North Korea indicated that, if hostile acts were not corrected, it reserved the option to close the inter-Korean joint liaison office (established in September 2018 in the Kaesong Industrial Complex) or to abrogate the September 19 agreement in the military domain, and attempted to put pressure on the ROK which wished to avoid such situations.⁹ Soon after, North Korea emphasized its intention for military action, with the General Staff of the Korean People's Army (KPA) considering the actions (June 13),¹⁰ and then blew up the inter-Korean joint liaison office (June 16).¹¹ On the following day, June 17, the KPA General Staff announced that plans for military action against the ROK would be submitted to the WPK Central Military Commission.¹²

The strong impression created by the bombing of the joint liaison office may reflect North Korea's intention to signal it would not hesitate to increase military tensions. If so, it would mean North Korea sought to conduct coercive diplomacy. Coercive diplomacy refers to presenting options that can inflict pain on the other country without defeating its troops necessarily, and forcing policymakers of the other country to choose an action that is preferable to the coercer.¹³

At this point in time, Chairman Kim Jong Un held a "preliminary meeting" of the WPK Central Military Commission and temporarily suspended the military action plans against the South (June 23).¹⁴ It was announced two days before the anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War (June 25). June 25 was also the anniversary of the ROK's alliance with the United States that fought the Korean War together. North Korea may have made the announcement shortly before the anniversaries to suggest it was ready to avoid escalation of the situation, depending on the stance of the South, and pressed the ROK to indicate whether

it would maintain or correct its "flunkeyism."

Less than a week later, senior officials in the Moon Jae-in administration announced that the South wishes to limit the content discussed at the U.S.-ROK working group, which North Korea had accused as subjecting people to "flunkeyism." For example, Moon Chung-in, special advisor to the president on unification, foreign affairs and national security, criticized that the working group had become a forum where the United States restricts South-North cooperation.¹⁵ At around the same time, Lee In-young, the former parliamentary leader of the Democratic Party (ruling party) who was nominated minister of unification by President Moon Jae-in, vowed that the ROK would separate what the South can decide on its own from the agenda of the U.S.-ROK working group, i.e., narrow the scope of U.S.-ROK discussions regarding policy on the North.¹⁶

President Moon Jae-in nominated former leader Lee In-young as minister of unification since his predecessor resigned in the wake of inter-Korean tensions caused by the bombing of the joint liaison office and other factors. The new minister of unification is expected to reflect the Moon administration's policy toward North Korea. Immediately after taking office, Minister Lee invited U.S. ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris to the ministry and told him that there were "positive and negative assessments of the working group." He said there were "negative assessments" in the ROK and conveyed that the functions of the working group must be "readjusted and rearranged" so that it can play a "role in promoting the development of inter-Korean relations and the consolidation of peace."¹⁷ On this occasion, the minister of unification made clear to the U.S. ambassador that South Korea would distinguish what can be discussed with the United States at the working group and what the ROK can do on its own and proceed with them.¹⁸

(2) The Moon Administration Seeks to Improve Relations with North Korea

In 2020, the ROK made a salient attempt to resolve the confrontation with the

DPRK, even in the face of Pyongyang's hardline stance which was almost synonymous with intimidation. The ROK's conciliatory attitude toward the North was already evident in a speech made on March 1, 2019 (100th anniversary of the independence movement against Japanese colonial rule). In this speech, President Moon Jae-in offered his historical perspective that "pro-Japanese" conservative factions regarded the "independence activists" as siding with North Korea, which created "ideological" stigmas in South Korea. President Moon drew linkages between the ideological stigmas and the South's policy toward North Korea, rephrasing it as "the 38th parallel drawn through our minds." The president expressed his intent to resume tours of Mt. Kumgang and the Kaesong Industrial Complex as well as complete the railroads running the length of the Korean Peninsula.¹⁹ In 2020, President Moon delivered an address to the people and the North on June 25, shortly after North Korea blew up the inter-Korean joint liaison office on June 16 and suspended military actions on June 23. In this speech, the president spoke about the significance of ending the war (ending the Korean War in a state of armistice), which the North could consider as an opportunity for the withdrawal of the U.S. Forces in Korea.

In addition, on June 30, 12 lawmakers from the Democratic Party proposed an amendment to the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act.²⁰ The amendment would regulate acts, such as leaflet distribution, loudspeaker broadcasting, and visual materials posting, on the pretext that they could threaten the safety of residents in areas along the MDL and of the ROK people. Contrary to previous regulations of leaflet distribution, the latest amendment makes the ban on leaflet distribution legally binding by adding "Prohibition of Violation of the Inter-Korean Agreement" (Article 24) and "Penalty Provisions" (Article 25). The government of the ROK asserts that this was a necessary security measure, while it could have been put in place out of consideration for its relations with North Korea. The amendment was passed by the plenary session of the National Assembly on December 14 and promulgated on December 29.²¹

South Korea has also been consistent in its conciliatory approach to the Northern Limit Line (NLL) issue. In a speech delivered on West Sea Defense

Day (March 27, 2020) to mourn the victims of the conflicts with North Korea over the NLL, President Moon Jae-in underscored that "Not a single armed conflict has occurred along the Northern Limit Line" since the signing of the September 19 agreement in the military domain.²² Yet North Korea has engaged in military actions in areas along the NLL. For example, under the leadership of Chairman Kim Jong Un, North Korea conducted artillery firing on an island off the coast near the NLL in the Yellow Sea on November 23, 2019 (officially reported by the North's media on November 25),²³ and then had its vessels cross the NLL and sail southward.²⁴ Although President Moon stressed that armed conflict had been avoided in waters around the NLL also including the period of the drill, the artillery firing was an act that the South Korean military considered as violation of the September 19 agreement.²⁵

In the incident in September 2020, it showed similar behavior with previous North Korean acts like using as leverage the avoidance of armed conflict, emphasized by the Moon administration. According to an announcement by the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff, on September 21, a North Korean fisheries inspection vessel discovered a missing crew member of the South Korean Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries in the North's waters area near the NLL, and North Korea conducted "an act of brutality by shooting at him and burning his body."²⁶ Nevertheless, two days after the incident, President Moon reiterated in a speech at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly that the ROK was committed to declaring an end to the war with North Korea and opening the door to peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.²⁷ President Moon's reiteration of the "end-of-war declaration" shortly after the incident was preceded by an exchange of letters between the leaders of the North and South around two weeks earlier (on September 12, State Affairs Commission Chairman Kim Jong Un replied to President Moon's September 8 letter).²⁸ Even after the incident, the Moon administration had showed its readiness to ease inter-Korean tensions toward North Korea.

In fact, the ROK's Presidential Office (Blue House) and Joint Chiefs of Staff disclosed the incident on September 24, after President Moon had delivered his

speech at the UN. The Blue House issued a statement that “strongly condemns” “shooting and killing our citizen and burning his body” as a violation of “international law and humanitarianism” and states that “those responsible must be severely punished.”²⁹ The Blue House explained the reason the incident was not disclosed sooner was because it occurred in waters hardly visible from the ROK side, and therefore, it took time to obtain reliable information.³⁰

A message reportedly sent by the United Front Department of the WPK Central Committee to the Blue House on September 25 conveyed Chairman Kim Jong Un’s view to the South, namely, that he felt “very sorry” for disappointing President Moon Jae-in and fellow countrymen in the South over an “awful incident.” This message was not released directly by the DPRK but was read out on its behalf by the Blue House.³¹ It can be said that the North Korean message, which contained wording that could be interpreted as an apology, was intended to incentivize the Moon administration to avoid taking a hard line response by hinting at an opportunity to ease tensions. On September 28, the Blue House explained that it would be difficult for South Korea to establish sufficient facts. So the government proposed a joint investigation of the incident to North Korea and then softened its condemnation of the incident.³²

However, the message from North Korea’s United Front Department also condemned the South Korean military for unilaterally describing the incident as “barbaric” without having any “evidence” and “without asking for [an] account of the crackdown process.” The Department said that the incident should not destroy “the relations of trust and respect” between North and South Korea. On the day the message was read out by the Blue House, North Korea’s Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that ROK vessels, searching for the crew member who was shot, “intruded” into “our territorial waters,” despite the “security measures” taken by the North to ensure that “the relations of trust and respect” would not be spoiled. The KCNA added that this foreshadowed the outbreak of a new “awful incident.”³³ Shortly thereafter, Chairman Kim gave a speech at the 75th anniversary of the foundation of the WPK on October 10 and expressed “hope [that] the day would come when the North and South take each

other’s hand again.”³⁴

In response to the North’s wavering messages, on October 11, the day after the 75th anniversary celebration, the National Security Council of the Moon administration stated it would take note of the DPRK’s stance to “restore inter-Korean relations.” Likewise, the ROK Ministry of National Defense commented on Chairman Kim Jong Un’s speech, saying it would take note of the North’s position that military force “will never be abused or used as a means for preemptive strike.”³⁵ As discussed later, Chairman Kim Jong Un mentioned that military force “will never be abused or used as a means for preemptive strike,” and went on to say, if there is infringement upon North Korea’s security, it “will enlist all our most powerful offensive strength in advance to punish [it],” leaving room for interpretation. It is hard to imagine that this latter remark went unnoticed by the Ministry of National Defense. The Ministry’s comment, which focused only on the first part of Chairman Kim Jong Un’s speech, may reflect the Moon administration’s strong desire to improve inter-Korean relations.

Minister of Unification Lee In-young insisted on the need for South-North cooperation being separated from the U.S.-ROK working group discussions to some extent. He reiterated the ROK’s willingness to cooperate in the humanitarian and economic fields, including provision of medical and food assistance in the wake of flood damage in North Korea and cooperation for tackling the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), such as supplying COVID-19 vaccines.³⁶ However, the response from North Korea has not been positive, and it is unclear whether the offer of cooperation has contributed to improving inter-Korean relations as the Moon Jae-in administration had intended.³⁷

2. Different Preferences for Military Capabilities between the Two Koreas

(1) North Korea: Continuation of Threats

Any decrease in the functions and activities of the KPA due to the spread of

COVID-19 would put the North Korean regime's very survival at risk. This can be said from the standpoint of both the North's use of military tensions as leverage to sway the ROK and manifestation of its deterrence. North Korea is believed to have begun taking measures against COVID-19 in early January 2020. North Korean authorities put everyone who crossed the border into the North after January 13 under "medical supervision."³⁸ At the end of January, the Non-Permanent Central Public Health Guidance Committee declared that the Hygienic and Anti-epidemic System would be converted into the State Emergency Anti-epidemic System until COVID-19 no longer posed a risk.³⁹ According to a briefing held in mid-March by Gen. Robert Abrams, commander of United Nations Command (UNC), U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC), and United States Forces Korea (USFK), the KPA were placed on lockdown for approximately 30 days, and no military aircraft activity by the North was observed for 24 days.⁴⁰

North Korea has not acknowledged any outbreak of COVID-19 within its borders. Even as the virus spread worldwide, North Korea took actions that increased military tensions, including firing SRBMs into the Sea of Japan four times in March. The first SRBMs fired on March 2 from the vicinity of Wonsan into the Sea of Japan are thought to have flown 240 kilometers.⁴¹ Analysis suggests these SRBMs are the same type launched by North Korea in the previous year, which was called a "super-large" multiple rocket launcher (MRL).⁴² On March 9, North Korea again fired missiles (flight range of about 200 kilometers), which are believed to be the "super-large" MRL, from the Sea of Japan side.⁴³ This was followed by another firing on March 21 of missiles (flight range of about 400 kilometers), which are said to be similar to the United States' Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), from the Yellow Sea side in the west, flying over North Korea and into the Sea of Japan,⁴⁴ and still another firing on March 29 of SRBMs (flight range of about 250 kilometers),⁴⁵ which it called a "super-large" MRL, from the Sea of Japan side.⁴⁶

On March 3, the day after the first launch, Kim Yo Jong, first vice department director of the Central Committee, criticized that South Korea considers "the

alliance with the U.S. dearer than its own fellow countrymen," and that consideration for the spread of COVID-19 was the only reason for refraining from the U.S.-ROK combined training in March.⁴⁷ North Korea urged the ROK to suspend drills with the United States on its own initiative rather than because of external factors such as the pandemic. The DPRK heightened military tensions and also imposed demands on the ROK. It is believed that North Korea perceives it has retaliatory deterrence capabilities that deter the United States and the ROK from taking a military response and that this is behind North Korea's posture. Any military action taken by the United States and the ROK against North Korea would raise fears of the North's retaliation by deploying MRLs and long-range artillery in large numbers to areas along the MDL and include the South Korean capital and surrounding areas in their range. Because North Korea has the military capability to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire,"⁴⁸ it has not faced preventive attacks from the United States and South Korea, even if the North's development of nuclear weapons is unveiled. Moreover, that allowed the DPRK to take actions provoking military tensions.⁴⁹

Since the previous year, the DPRK has continued to develop SRBMs and enhance other capabilities to enlarge the coverage of the "sea of fire." The 300-millimeter caliber MRL launched by North Korea in 2019⁵⁰ is estimated to have a range (about 170 kilometers) that reaches U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys, located south of Seoul, where the U.S.-ROK CFC is to relocate.⁵¹ The USFK concentrated facilities in Camp Humphreys partly for allowing more families to accompany personnel as U.S. bases relocate southward.⁵² In addition, the South Korean government continues to develop the surrounding urban areas.⁵³ After the USFK was relocated away from the range of the traditional "sea of fire," North Korea has continued to pursue them and attempts to maintain the option of engulfing the camp and its periphery into armed conflict.

Following the series of SRBM launches and an inspection of an air unit drill in the western area,⁵⁴ Chairman Kim Jong Un held an Enlarged Meeting of the WPK Central Military Commission in May 2020. In its announcement about

the meeting, North Korea referred to strengthening “nuclear war deterrence” and released photos of Chairman Kim pointing to a blurred-out image in front of senior military officers, suggesting that a major weapon was under development confidentially (May 24).⁵⁵ The images and the chairman’s remarks released by North Korea may have been intended to hint to the United States, the ROK, and other countries that progress was being made in nuclear weapons development that could trigger a new crisis. Less than 10 days later, North Korea issued a statement announcing it would abrogate the September 19 agreement in the military domain, which had been marked as an achievement of the Moon Jae-in administration (June 4; see previous section). As discussed above, the South Korean administration sought to distance itself from the United States after North Korea’s intimidation.

On October 10, at the military parade on the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the WPK, Chairman Kim Jong Un referred to “dear fellow countrymen in the South” and raised issues that could be related to North Korea’s strategy toward the United States or nuclear doctrine. According to the speech, North Korea intends to strengthen its military capability based on “[its] timetable” and build a “war deterrent” to contain all dangerous attempts, including nuclear threat.⁵⁶ This is in line with the commentary published in the *Rodong Sinmun*



Chairman Kim Jong Un delivering a speech at the military parade on the 75th anniversary of the WPK’s founding on October 10, 2020 (KCNA/Kyodo)

in 2018, which noted that the suspension of nuclear testing was “an important process for the worldwide nuclear disarmament” and the DPRK would “advanc[e] along the path taken by itself according to its timetable.”⁵⁷ The concept of non-proliferation precludes non-nuclear weapon states from possessing nuclear

weapons, i.e., countries other than the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China, which are designated as nuclear-weapons states in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). It is not a concept that permits North Korea to possess nuclear weapons until “worldwide nuclear disarmament” is achieved.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the speech by Chairman Kim Jong Un strongly suggests that the DPRK rejects denuclearization.

In the same speech, Chairman Kim Jong Un stated that “our war deterrent” “will never be abused or used as a means for preemptive strike,” but that “if, and if, any forces infringe upon the security of our state and attempt to have recourse to military force against us, I will enlist all our most powerful offensive strength in advance to punish them.” The following points can be noted. First, although Chairman Kim did not make it explicit, “most powerful offensive strength” may refer to nuclear weapons. Second, it is unclear what is meant by a situation which threatens North Korea’s security and enlists all of North Korea’s most powerful offensive strength in advance. It appears to leave room for the preemptive use of strength, depending on North Korea’s perception of the situation. Third, the aim of preemptive strike is to “punish.” The intention could be to threaten to destroy value targets, such as densely populated areas and industrial centers, rather than targeting the source of an imminent attack by the other country. If it cannot be ruled out that North Korea will use nuclear weapons as a means for preemptive strike in a countervalue strike rather than a counterforce strike, then Kim Jong Un’s speech could be understood as a strong message, even if it is ambiguous in wording.

(2) South Korea Seeks Self-Reliance, Facing the U.S.-China Competition

With North Korea launching the Pukguksong-3 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM)⁵⁹ on October 2, 2019, the ROK Navy reiterated the need to equip its next-generation Aegis ships with interceptor missiles equivalent to the SM-3 ballistic missile defense interceptor. The SLBM, launched from the Sea of Japan side, flew 450 kilometers and reached an altitude of about 900 kilometers, which was considerably higher than usual. The SLBM is believed to

have been on a lofted trajectory that makes interception difficult.⁶⁰ A missile on a lofted trajectory is hard to intercept by the conventional Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) system, which intercepts missiles at an altitude no higher than 100 kilometers, far below the SLBM's maximum altitude.⁶¹ Originally, the KAMD focused on terminal-phase, lower-tier missile defense and was designed to deal with situations on the Korean Peninsula without relying on the missile defense of the U.S. Forces. In an emergency, it detects an enemy missile with an early warning radar or an Aegis radar, analyzes the information, and then promptly intercepts the missile. While South Korea's Ministry of National Defense stresses that it constructs its own KAMD system, it is also enhancing interoperability with the U.S. Forces.⁶²

A week later, on October 10, the ROK chief of naval operations told the National Assembly that the Navy was working to procure SM-3-class interceptors, citing their effectiveness in defending against SLBMs or high-altitude ballistic missiles.⁶³ A missile equivalent to the SM-3 would have an altitude of well over 100 kilometers. According to materials submitted by the Navy Headquarters to the National Assembly at that time, SM-3-class missiles would be needed for developing the KAMD from a lower-tier-focused system into a multilayered one. This would expand the range of intercepts to an altitude of 100 kilometers or higher to deal with improvements in North Korea's ballistic missile capabilities.⁶⁴

The introduction of interceptors against ballistic missiles has raised controversy in South Korea since several years ago. On October 15, 2013, the ROK Ministry of National Defense limited the range of the KAMD to an altitude of 100 kilometers, while at the same time denying the introduction of SM-3 interceptors and the acceptance of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system deployment.⁶⁵ This was followed by South Korea's decision not to introduce THAAD but to introduce its replacement,⁶⁶ the indigenously manufactured long-range surface-to-air missile (L-SAM; not yet developed).⁶⁷ About four months earlier, President Park Geun-hye of the ROK had vowed to establish a "strategic cooperative partnership" with President Xi Jinping of

China.⁶⁸ However, South Korea has also agreed to a "comprehensive strategic alliance"⁶⁹ with the United States. In 2015, debate arose over the deployment of THAAD to the USFK, prompting China's Defense Minister Chang Wanquan to express concerns over it. Defense Minister Han Min-goo of the ROK explained to Defense Minister Chang that South Korea would harmonize its "comprehensive strategic alliance" with the United States and its "strategic cooperative partnership" with China.⁷⁰ The ROK explicitly stated that it would harmonize each of the strategic partnerships with the United States and China for the purpose of alleviating China's concerns over the introduction of THAAD. When the Park Geun-hye administration decided to accept the deployment of THAAD to the USFK in July 2016, the Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that it was "strongly dissatisfied with and firmly opposes to this."⁷¹

About a year later, in late October 2017, the newly inaugurated Moon Jae-in administration engaged in negotiations with China, aiming to end the economic retaliation that China had been launching against the ROK for accepting THAAD deployment.⁷² The ROK agreed not to change its three existing positions as demanded by China, which were: (i) not make an additional deployment of THAAD; (ii) not join the U.S. missile defense system; and (iii) not develop the ROK-Japan-U.S. trilateral cooperation into a military alliance ("three no-policies").⁷³ The "three no's" constitute red lines for China, and it can be said that the ROK accepted China's insistence on not crossing the red lines if South Korea does not want to be disadvantaged.⁷⁴

The ROK Navy pressed for the introduction of SM-3-class interceptors, noting that "neighboring countries should not interfere in the decisions of a sovereign nation."⁷⁵ However, at the South Korean National Assembly in 2019, legislators from the Democratic Party on the side of the Moon Jae-in administration expressed concern over the ROK Navy's assertion, stating that SM-3-class missiles violated the three no-policies.⁷⁶ The ruling party also expressed concern that the SM-3 exceeded the altitude for intercepting missiles targeting the Korean Peninsula area.⁷⁷

The 2021–2025 Mid-term Defense Plan, unveiled by the Moon Jae-in

administration in August 2020, aims for “comprehensive multilayered defense.” It mentions the introduction of additional Aegis ships but does not refer to SM-3-class missiles, which the Navy had insisted were necessary for this purpose. The Mid-term Plan focuses on improving defense capabilities, including the Korean version of the Iron Dome air defense system to protect the capital Seoul from North Korea’s long-range artillery. They also include the deployment of additional surface-to-air missiles, such as the Patriot and the indigenously manufactured Cheolmae II to complement the KAMD. SM-3-class missiles, however, were removed from the plan.⁷⁸

In August 2020, Suh Hoon, director of national security at the Blue House, held talks with Yang Jiechi, director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office of the Chinese Communist Party. According to Director Suh’s explanation, the ROK elicited the comment of China that South Korea was “a priority country to visit” for Chinese president Xi Jinping.⁷⁹ The Chinese announcement, however, mentioned neither this comment nor President Xi’s visit to South Korea.⁸⁰ The Moon Jae-in administration hoped President Xi would visit South Korea, giving China the ability to leverage the visit to extract concessions from South Korea on certain issues. In fact, there was a comment of the ROK released unilaterally by China. According to China, Director Suh of the ROK is said to have stated that it was “jointly building lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula” with China. However, this was not mentioned in the South Korean announcement.⁸¹ The 2018 South-North Panmunjom Declaration contains text suggesting that discussions toward a peace regime may be held without China. China’s announcement may suggest that it would ensure its participation in the discussions.

On August 15, 2019, President Moon Jae-in called for building “a nation that cannot be shaken.”⁸² About a month and a half after this speech, in October 2019, President Moon instructed negotiations to revise the U.S.-ROK missile guidelines. The guidelines, while undergoing revisions since 1979, constrain the development of rockets and ballistic missiles by South Korea. On July 28, 2020, Kim Hyun-chong, deputy national security advisor, announced that

restrictions on the development of solid-propellant space rockets were lifted as a result of the negotiations. He explained that this was significant in bringing South Korea closer to becoming “a nation that cannot be shaken.”⁸³ On the one hand, the ROK removed the acquisition of SM-3 interceptors from the Mid-term Defense Plan as if to give in to pressure from China. On the other hand, the administration strongly supported the development of missiles exceeding the existing restrictions imposed by the United States in order to become “a nation that cannot be shaken.”

On July 23, shortly before the announcement of the revised missile guidelines, President Moon visited the Agency for Defense Development (ADD). Successfully developing the indigenously manufactured SRBM Hyunmoo-2, President Moon praised ADD for serving as the fountainhead of the defense capabilities of “[t]he Republic of Korea [which] ranks 6th globally in military strength.”⁸⁴ During the Park Chung-hee administration in the 1970s, ADD developed the first indigenously manufactured ballistic missile, the Baekgom, Nike Hercules Korea-1 (NHK-1), using technology secretly acquired through a project related to the Nike surface-to-air guided missile of the United States.⁸⁵ The U.S.-ROK missile guidelines originated from a promise made by the South Korean defense minister to restrict the development of NHK-1, responding to a request from the USFK commander to suspend the development following the test firing of the missile in 1978.⁸⁶

During the visit to ADD, President Moon referred to an “indigenous ballistic missile capable of carrying one of the world’s heaviest payloads” and is said to have told others to secure “complete missile sovereignty” in the future.⁸⁷ The president likely had in mind the Hyunmoo-4 ballistic missile, which was developed after the previous revised missile guidelines (2017) abolished restrictions on payload weight and is said to have a payload weight of two tons. South Korea reportedly test fired the missile in March 2020.⁸⁸ The Hyunmoo-4 has a range of 800 kilometers, which can strike all of North Korea from a city south of central South Korea and is the upper limit of the range that continues to be restricted under the missile guidelines.⁸⁹

In September 2020, the Moon Jae-in administration proposed a 52.9 trillion-won defense budget for FY2021. This was an increase of 5.5% over the previous year, even as the South Korean economy was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. The budget priorities included a military satellite communication system project (2.2296 trillion won) to enable the transfer of wartime OPCON Authority held by the CFC commander (U.S. Army general) to a general of the ROK Armed Forces.⁹⁰ In his Armed Forces Day speech on September 25, President Moon underscored capabilities, such as the development of ballistic missiles with a range of over 800 kilometers, a 30,000-ton “light aircraft carrier,” and submarines. However, it is unclear whether these capabilities are necessary based on South Korea’s role in the U.S.-Republic of Korea Combined Operations envisioned against North Korea. The president did not specifically mention North Korea in his speech.⁹¹

With regard to the U.S.-ROK Alliance, host nation support (South Korea’s share of the cost for stationing the USFK) has been debated between the two countries. The ROK’s share has continued to increase from 790.4 billion won in 2010 to 1,038.9 billion won in 2019.⁹² The Special Measures Agreement (SMA) for 2020 was still being negotiated at the start of the year, and on March 20, the ROK disclosed that “the two sides have differences in their positions” and the talks were temporarily suspended. The USFK furloughed more than 4,000 Korean National employees who should have been paid under the SMA since April 1, and this situation continued until the South Korean government offered to shoulder their salaries in June. After the SMA ceased to be effective at the end of December 2019, the United States is said to have had to unilaterally bear the costs of the USFK.⁹³

In the October 14, 2020 Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) Joint Communique between the U.S. and ROK defense ministers, the United States noted that the current lack of an SMA could have lasting effects for Alliance readiness. On the other hand, in the same Joint Communique, the United States and the ROK discussed ways to transfer the OPCON of the CFC (commanded by a U.S. Army general) to the Future Combined Forces Command (commanded

by a ROK Armed Forces general), and also committed to continue U.S.-ROK-Japan defense cooperation, including information sharing for the security of Northeast Asia.⁹⁴ At the SCM, the ROK reportedly stated that it would “thoroughly prepare for a combined defense posture under the South Korean military’s leadership by fulfilling the conditions as early as possible,” while the United States responded that “Fully meeting all the conditions for the transition of operational control to the Republic of Korea commander will take time.”⁹⁵ The comments reveal a gap between the United States and South Korea over the timing of the OPCON transfer. In 2013, during the previous Park Geun-hye administration, the two countries were said to have considered the ROK assuming the commander’s position for a new command similar in size to the CFC after the OPCON transfer.⁹⁶ However, a specific transfer date was no longer mentioned in 2014. Since then, it has been decided that the OPCON transfer would proceed under a “conditions-based” approach.⁹⁷

In 2020, unlike the previous two years, no major progress related to the Korean Peninsula was seen at the summit level, in part because the United States was preparing for a presidential election and in part because of the global spread of COVID-19. The North’s testing of the South was thus all the more salient in 2020, as seen in the bombing of the inter-Korean joint liaison office. Nevertheless, Japan-ROK and U.S.-ROK bilateral efforts as well as Japan-U.S.-ROK trilateral efforts are important for peace and stability in East Asia, alongside improving inter-Korean relations. Attention will be focused on how South Korea will work together with the administration of Suga Yoshihide, Abe Shinzo’s successor, and the new President Joseph Biden.

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