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Implications of the U.S.-Iran Conflict on the Korean Peninsula

Suh, Bo-hyuk

(Director, Peace Research Division)

Kim, Youcheer

(Research Fellow, Planning and Coordination Division)

The military conflict between the U.S. and Iran that happened at the dawn of 2020 not only negatively impacted the regional order in the Middle East and stability of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, but also directly and indirectly affected the situation on the Korean Peninsula. The crisis heightened the need for inter-agency coordination in Korea's foreign policy-making, not to speak of taking into account the economic impacts when it considers the issue of dispatching South Korea's troops to the Strait of Hormuz. North Korea might have become vigilant of the possible military threat from the U.S. and at the same time reaffirmed the need for advancing its nuclear capability. The U.S. stated around the time of its assassination of the Iranian military commander that it still has hope for DPRK-U.S. dialogue. However, the possibility of the North accepting a denuclearization formula of 'nuclear abandonment vs. sanctions lifting' becomes even slimmer due to a combination of decisions at the Plenary Meeting of the Workers' Party of Korea last December and a shock caused by the U.S.'s military operation against Iran. The ROK should come up with more cautious and feasible policy options with a consideration for the ramification of the U.S.-Iran conflict when it plays a parallel role of being a mediator in the resumption of North Korea-U.S. negotiations and of improving inter-Korean relations.

1. Overview of the U.S.-Iran Conflict

The world has witnessed a gloomy start of 2020 due to conflicts that occurred between the U.S. and Iran in the first week of the year. Although military conflicts between the two countries seemingly came to a halt, there had already been massive casualties while another conflict could happen again anytime soon. In addition, the U.S. has demanded that the Republic of Korea (ROK) dispatch its troops to the Strait of Hormuz.

Despite such conflicts between the U.S. and Iran, the administrations in both countries do not have much to lose. The Iranian regime can utilize the incident as a pretext for resuming its nuclear development and may have its status raised as a dominant player in the Middle East. Iran now faces a task to respond to tightened sanctions from the U.S. and criticisms both from home and abroad on the shooting down of a private airplane. By committing a precise and agile military action, the U.S. once again demonstrated its reputation as a super-power equipped with a state-of-the-art military force. In a way, the Trump administration has domestically grasped an opportunity to muddle through the political quagmire by conducting the military operation.

A chasm in the international nuclear non-proliferation regime is the biggest side effect caused by the assassination of Iranian commander, Qasem Soleimani. The Trump administration withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a multilateral agreement concluded during the Obama administration. While Iran reduced the range of implementation of this nuclear agreement and resumed uranium enrichment, this time it officially declared an end to the implementation of JCPOA. North Korea also reaffirmed its will to continue developing nuclear weapons while criticizing the U.S.'s policy toward North Korea. The world now faces the nuclear development of Iran and North Korea in 2020, which marks 50 years since the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) came into effect.

2. Implications of the U.S.-Iran Conflict on the Korean Peninsula

With regard to the implications of the U.S.-Iran conflict on the Korean Peninsula, we wish to emphasize four main points.

First, the implications of the U.S.-Iran conflict on the ROK are multi-faceted. South Korea imports most of its oil from oil-producing countries in the Strait of Hormuz so maintaining a friendly relationship with those countries is a key to promoting economic interests for the ROK. That is why it is necessary for the ROK government to be prudent about accommodating the U.S. request of dispatching troops to the Strait of Hormuz. Currently, the South Korean government reviews transferring the unit already dispatched in the Middle East to the Strait of Hormuz without an operational command from the U.S., which deems appropriate.

In addition, a need arises for the ROK to strengthen a close cooperative system between South Korea and the U.S. so that it can manage the situation on the Korean Peninsula after the conflicts between the U.S. and Iran. The ROK and the U.S. decided to expand and further develop the alliance, not only in the military domain but also in economic and value-related areas in the 2000s. The ROK-U.S. alliance will be increasingly likely to move beyond the Korean Peninsula. In line with this development, the ROK needs to develop a paradigm of 'peace alliance' that combines reciprocal interests of both countries and the expectation of the international community. In addition, it is necessary to establish a system of comprehensive diplomacy from the long-term perspective with a consideration for the patterns of increasing mutual connectedness in foreign affairs and security policy as well as growing mutual connectedness with actors.

Second, the implications of the U.S.-Iran conflict on North Korea are even more complex. The U.S.'s precise and agile military action must have given the Kim Jong Un regime a strong warning. North Korea, as Iran did, could also commit a calculated and limited provocation, but Pyongyang is not likely to take provocative military measures in advance, given the deterrence from America's superior military power. The North, however, will pay attention to a reality where Iran is confronted with ever stronger sanctions after withdrawing from an existing multilateral

denuclearization agreement and resuming nuclear development. North Korea and Iran are highly likely to come up with a measure to jointly respond to the U.S.-led nuclear non-proliferation regime and the international sanctions regime based on their existing friendly relationship. This could present a new challenge to North Korea policy both in South Korea and the U.S.

A momentum for resuming the stalemated DPRK-U.S. dialogue could be created if the U.S.'s superior military power, the maintenance of the U.S.-led sanctions on North Korea, and the 'friendship' between Kim Jong Un and Trump could simultaneously be at play. While the DPRK declared to 'make a breakthrough head-on' at the Plenary Meeting of the Workers' Party of Korea at the end of last year, it has still left open the door for dialogue with the U.S. Early this year, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo mentioned a hope for dialogue with North Korea. Despite a huge gap between the U.S. and North Korea over denuclearization and peace, the incident in the Middle East reveals the increasing need for working-level contact before a negotiation in earnest. On January 11, advisor of North Korea's Foreign Ministry Kim Kye-gwan said that Chairman Kim Jong Un received a birthday letter from President Trump and demanded a 'fair' negotiation to the U.S. In fact, Kim Kye-gwan once again criticized the DPRK-U.S. summit in Hanoi held in February 2019, expressing hope that the U.S. would come to the negotiating table with a full compensation measure that corresponds to a full denuclearization. North Korea's basic stance is that it will not accept a negotiation of 'a complete nuclear abandonment vs. the partial lifting of sanctions' as outlined in the Hanoi summit.

Third, the impact of the U.S.-Iran conflict on inter-Korean relations is not optimistic in the short-term because of the increasing security threat perceived by the North and the subsequently growing need for North Korea to develop nuclear weapons. If South Korea were to accommodate the U.S. demand of sending its troops to the Strait of Hormuz, it could turn a red light on the ROK's relations with Iran and provide the North with a rationale for criticism toward the South. North Korea, since the break-off of the summit in Hanoi last February, has criticized South Korea for its attitude of 'blindly following the U.S.' and 'depending heavily on foreign power.' The ROK is once again making an effort to serve as a mediator in North Korea-U.S.

negotiation ever since President Moon Jae-in's proposal to the North at a New Year's Day speech last January 7 as well as Blue House National Security Office Director Chung Eui-yong's visit to the U.S. However, given the level of criticism of South Korea by an advisor of North Korea's Foreign Ministry Kim Kye-gwan, the resumption of inter-Korean talks does not seem likely at least in the short-term. Should South Korea decide to dispatch its troops to the Strait of Hormuz, it will add yet another reason for North Korea to reject inter-Korean dialogue. If North Korea expects practical benefits from the resumption of inter-Korean talks, dispatching troops will not become an important factor but the odds of that happening are slim at this moment. In the written decisions made at the Plenary Meeting of the Workers' Party of Korea last December, North Korea stated that "DPRK-U.S. relations are inevitably at an impasse," and that "it will resolutely declare to continue developing strategic weapons deemed necessary and preemptive for national security without a pause until the U.S.'s hostile policy on North Korea gets lifted and a permanent and solid peace regime is established on the Chosun Peninsula." Considering North Korea's remarks, the ROK government needs to be cautious on making moves, especially making suggestions to the North, with a consideration for feasibility and consistency. Cooperation with the U.S. should proceed behind the scenes. It is necessary for the government to encourage exchange in the private sector and create a momentum for inter-Korean dialogue.

Fourth, it is open-ended how the U.S.-Iran conflict might affect the denuclearization talks and peace process on the Korean Peninsula. The international community has witnessed North Korea and Iran's move of continuing their nuclear development under tightened sanctions since the U.S.-Iran conflict. The U.S. and Iran could collide again in the aftermath of the shooting-down of a private airplane as well as due to a possible attack by the *Shia* militia on the U.S. military. President Trump and his advisors at the White House have no choice but to focus on managing Iranian issues for the time being since the Trump administration is expected to impose more sanctions on Iran. Given North Korea's current position of 'making a breakthrough head-on,' a phase for dialogue would only be created if the U.S. makes the move first. Considering the circumstance, the stalemate in the DPRK-U.S.

negotiation is highly likely to stay for some time. Although one cannot rule out the possibility of resuming a top-down style dialogue triggered by letter diplomacy between Kim Jong Un and Trump, a key to dialogue still lies in the hands of the Trump administration due to North Korea's opening of a path of 'making a breakthrough head-on.' Another variable is President Trump's political judgment. A final decision will have to be made soon over whether he would choose to have high-level talks within the framework of complete denuclearization vs. complete corresponding measures while suspending the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise, or whether he would manage the current state of impasse and focus on his reelection campaign. South Korea will have to be prepared for those two possibilities. ©KINU 2020

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