



Online Series

2019. 10. 02. | CO 19-21

Meaning and Implementation Tasks of Turning the DMZ into an International Peace Zone

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A proposal of President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea (ROK) of turning the DMZ into an international peace zone can be interpreted as that the ROK will expand the peace process on the Korean Peninsula to include the international community, thereby creating a new momentum and exercising our own proactive authority. Transforming the DMZ into an international peace zone requires the followings: adopting the UN Security Council resolution, attracting the UN and other international organizations related to peace and ecology to the DMZ, and forming a tentatively named “Korean Peninsula Border Management Committee.” Through implementation, South Korea should transform the DMZ, a symbol of the Cold War and division, into an international landmark of peace and ecology and an icon of Korean peace culture.

Meaning of Turning the DMZ into an International Peace Zone

President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea (ROK) laid out his proposal of turning the demilitarized zone (DMZ) into an international peace zone in his keynote speech at the 74th UN General Assembly on September 24, 2019. To that end, President Moon called for international cooperation on the following tasks: working together with North Korea

to inscribe the DMZ as a UNESCO World Heritage Site; designating the area connecting Panmunjom and Gaeseong as a Peace and Cooperation District; housing UN offices in the DMZ; and removing mines laid in the DMZ. President Moon's proposal indicates that transforming the DMZ into a peace zone with the assurances of the international community will enable guaranteeing the security of North Korea and establishing a permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula. Implicit in his proposal is also the expectation that overcoming the division along the DMZ will accelerate the economic cooperation between the Korean Peninsula and East Asia.

The two Koreas already agreed on transforming the DMZ into a peace zone in the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018 and in the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain. Among the commitments made, the following have been promptly implemented: the cessation of military hostilities along the Military Demarcation Line (MDL); demilitarization of Joint Security Area (JSA); demilitarization and shut-down of guard posts (GP); and a joint excavation project to recover the remains of fallen soldiers of the Korean War in Arrowhead Ridge, Cheorwon. According to the Ministry of National Defense, there has been no violation of inter-Korean military agreements thus far. Although the impasse in North Korea-U.S. negotiations has hindered the overall development of inter-Korean relations, it carries special significance in that the military domain has made the biggest achievement in the peace process on the Korean Peninsula, which started to accelerate since last year.

Progress on the denuclearization of North Korea is a starting point of resolving issues on the Korean Peninsula and is also closely linked to establishing a peace regime on the peninsula and forming new inter-Korean relations. The problem, however, is this ongoing dilemma, in which a stalemate in North Korea-U.S. denuclearization talks has delayed the entire peace process on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea is faced with a reality that the international sanctions regime imposes a fundamental restriction on the overall advancement of inter-Korean relations. President Moon's suggestion of turning the DMZ into an international peace zone is meaningful in that it marks a paradigm shift in the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. His suggestion can be interpreted as such: South Korea will expand the

peace process on the Korean Peninsula to include the international community, the current process of which completely relies on one simple element of progress in North Korea-U.S. denuclearization negotiations, thereby creating a new momentum and exercising our own proactive authority.

North Korea chose a path of nuclear armament for the guarantee of its regime and security. Now the North seeks to obtain that goal via North Korea-U.S. negotiation. If the international community, led by the UN, guarantees North Korean regime and security, it will hold far-reaching implications beyond a peace settlement through bilateral relations between the North and the U.S. This is because transforming the DMZ into a peace zone assured by the international community will fundamentally guarantee North Korean regime and security. If international research and cooperative organizations are to be stationed near the DMZ and begin their operations, it will effectively block the possibility of armed conflict, leading to a permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Once tangible progress is made in transforming the DMZ into an international peace zone, the peace process on the Korean Peninsula will gain a new momentum different in nature from what we see now. By turning the DMZ into an international peace zone, North Korea will be able to have a firm guarantee of regime and security not only from the U.S. but also from the international community. The DMZ will be transformed into a space not of separation but of interaction in an international peace zone, which can stimulate peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and the rest of East Asia.

Implementation Tasks of Transforming the DMZ into an International Peace Zone

A discussion on the peaceful usage of the DMZ has a long history, the representative example of which was former Park Geun-hye government's designation of the DMZ international peace park. A main characteristic of President Moon's proposal is that it focuses on the international guarantee of peace in the DMZ. Several measures can be devised to realize his suggestion on turning the DMZ into an international peace zone. First, there should be an agreement on transforming

the DMZ into an international peace zone through the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council resolution. Installing a working-level body such as a tentatively named “DMZ Peace Special Committee” under the umbrella of the UN could also be considered. Given that the DMZ on the South Korean side is managed by the United Nations Command (UNC), reforming and integrating the UNC into a UN-affiliated organization is an option to consider. What is important is that the function of the UN working-level body should be about preserving and maintaining peace as opposed to the current practice of putting restrictions on the sovereignty of the DMZ.

Attracting the UN and other international organizations related to peace and ecology to the DMZ could be a practical way of establishing peace. The DMZ will become an international symbol when it is transformed into a center of peace involving peace research, peace-keeping operations, arms control, and trust-building, and when it is positioned as a hub of ecology research and cooperation. Also, the possibility exists that not just current UN and international organizations but also a new South Korean government-led international organization could be placed near the DMZ. To that end, it is necessary to explore how the tentatively named “DMZ Peace and Ecology Cooperative Organization” can be established and evolve into an international hub for peace and ecology research and cooperation worldwide. It is desirable to have a gradual approach in removing land mines with a consideration for its impact on the ecosystem of the DMZ, starting in an area with an urgent need and expanding step-by-step. There should be measures for joint management and cooperation of the DMZ between the two Koreas in bracing for the DMZ to be inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In addition to the DMZ international peace zone, measures should be crafted on how to develop inter-Korean border regions into a main hub of economic cooperation between the Korean Peninsula and East Asia. Given that the DMZ used to be at the forefront of a divided economy that separated economic cooperation between the Korean Peninsula and East Asia, turning the DMZ into an international peace zone indicates that a new driving force will have been created for the peace economy. Economic cooperation among the South, the North, and the international

community should be accelerated via establishing a Peace and Cooperation District connecting Panmunjom and Gaeseong.

Remaining Tasks of Turning the DMZ into an International Peace Zone

An effective, cooperative structure should be created to realize the vision of transforming the DMZ into an international peace zone because North Korea owns the right to manage half of the DMZ and fulfilling this vision would be difficult to achieve without also gaining international cooperation. It is necessary to form a tentatively named “Korean Peninsula Border Management Committee” and shape a cooperative system dealing with not only issues of inter-Korean border regions but also the DMZ international peace zone. It should be noted that East and West Germany formed a border committee in times of division and consulted on important issues, such as the prevention of infectious diseases. Countless inter-Korean issues are mounting such as the African swine fever virus and management of water resources in the border regions. South Korea should also actively convince North Korea of the importance of turning the DMZ into an international peace zone while taking notice of the fact that North Korea is also seeking the guarantee of its regime and security.

It is important to induce the support and cooperation of the international community for turning the DMZ into an international peace zone. It is also necessary to present a detailed plan and blueprint for the DMZ before expecting a response from the international community about the proposal of the DMZ international peace zone. In particular, active efforts are needed to induce the cooperation of the UN. A cooperative mechanism that has an implementation authority should be founded within the government. The brand value of the DMZ is astronomical and many peace- and ecology-loving global citizens keep their eye on the DMZ. This is evidenced by numerous foreign tourists who come to Korea and want to visit it. It could be also expected that the tentatively named “Planning Committee on DMZ International Peace Zone” would engage international experts, scholars, and activists and that the planning and designing for the future of the DMZ could become a festival for global citizens.

The DMZ, a symbol of the Cold War and division, paradoxically holds an intrinsic value as a place of introspection and remembrance and as a space of hope for co-prosperity. Korea Initiative that leads world peace and a culture of ecology should be launched by turning the DMZ into an international peace zone. Now is the time to gather our resources and talents to transform the DMZ into an international landmark of peace and ecology and an icon of Korean peace culture.

The DMZ is a cherished heritage site not just for the Korean Peninsula, but also for humanity. The entire DMZ should be recognized both as one united belt and a space of connection. Creative efforts on transforming the DMZ into an international peace zone are needed in line with the principal of preservation and sustainable usage of the area. ©KINU 2019

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