

The February 13 Agreement and Resumption of Ministerial Meetings between North and South Korea: From Crisis on the Korean Peninsula to Peaceful Management

Moon-Young Huh

(Director, Division of Peace Planning Studies, KINU)

It seemed that the state of affairs on the Korean peninsula in 2007 will turn out to be very troublesome. In its new years joint editorial, North Korea, which had conducted nuclear weapons tests despite worldwide protest, stressed ‘constructing a strong nation based on acquisition of nuclear deterrence’ and ‘anti-American independence.’ The United States, on its part, also seemed unwilling to relax financial sanctions and diplomatic pressure against North Korea. On top of that, the North Korean nuclear crisis caused by the clash between North Korea’s national survival strategy and US strategy for world supremacy was exacerbated by the mutual distrust between the two leaders, Chairman Kim Jong Il and President Bush, leading people to suspect that the problem will not be solved any time soon.

But on February 13, the early measures to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis reached an agreement in the third phase meeting during the fifth round of the Six-Party Talks. How should this agreement be evaluated? And what should we keep in mind and carry out in order to continue the peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem?

The February 13 agreement means that the beginning steps for peaceful efforts to abolish North Korea’s nuclear weapons program have been guaranteed. The six nations have agreed to relax tensions on the Korean peninsula and the possibility of military clashes, and to search for solutions through diplomatic efforts. And an implementation of the ‘Action Plan’ for the 9·19 Joint Statement has been prepared as well. Through these measures, the long journey towards the abolishment of North Korea’s nuclear weapons has taken its first step. These conclusions are less a fundamental solution and more an establishment of trust to find solutions and an agreement to peacefully manage the situation in the Korean peninsula.

The factors that contributed to the February 13 agreement were the tactical changes of North Korea, the US, and China, and also the determination of the South Korean government. In the case of China, it had

made clear its opposition to North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons but also its understanding of North Korea's predicament. But after North Korea conducted its tests, it changed its position and cooperated with the US. For the United States part, it is now in a difficult situation of its own with the war in Iraq turning into a second Vietnam war, and also the nuclear problem with Iran. And the strategy to pressure North Korea into giving up its nuclear weapons through sanctions had reached its limit, so the US now had to search for solutions based on negotiations. South Korea was also active in devising peaceful measures through cooperation with the US and China. It seems that North Korea, responding to these movements, agreed to the February 13 agreement in order to relax international pressure, acquire economic compensations, create the conditions for South Korea's active support, and to establish channels for bilateral talks between North Korea and the US. In other words, North Korea's survival strategy to relax sanctions and pressure and to acquire economic support, America's world strategy to freeze additional nuclear activity by North Korea, China's strategy for regional control in order to lead to a step-by-step and steady elimination of the North's nuclear programs, and South Korea's strategy to maintain peace on the Korean peninsula were all factors in leading up to the compromise that made the February 13 agreement possible.

But the February 13 Beijing deal with only the early implementations of the September 19 Joint Statement, so all issues concerning the North Korean nuclear problem are not addressed. And it is still too early to know whether North Korea will give up the nuclear weapons it claims to have. The fact that the agreement is concerned primarily with economic issues is also a limitation. For North Korea to claim that it has converted into a 'strategic change,' it must show the world that it will implement Clause 1 ("abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs") of the September 19 Joint Statement.

Despite these aspects, the significance of the February 13 agreement must not be underestimated. Although it was unable to reach a fundamental resolution to the North Korean nuclear problem, it is valuable in that it has prevented the deterioration of the security situation of the Korean peninsula. Even long journeys start with the first step. And the journey toward the abolishment of North Korea's nuclear weapons has just started moving toward the right direction. But if we want to move beyond the mere abolition of North Korea's nuclear weapons and build a genuine peace regime on the Korean peninsula, a more meticulous approach is necessary.

First, we must pay attention to whether the first steps are implemented without any problems. We must watch closely whether North Korea will close and seal off its nuclear facilities in Yongbyon, and allow inspectors from the IAEA to resume their work. Also important is whether North Korea will follow the necessary steps and report all nuclear programs, and close down its nuclear facilities.

Second, we must restrain ourselves from adopting extreme attitudes such as ‘principle of mistrust of North Korea’ or ‘optimism about North Korea,’ but rather encourage changes within North Korea from the perspective of ‘gradual change.’ Through these negotiations, North Korea has shown that it is committed to strategic changes. But implementing these strategic changes is difficult. This is because North Korea had always thought of nuclear weapons as the final fortress in maintaining its regime. It is now time to cooperate to make sure that North Korea will choose to implement the fundamental changes in addition to strategic changes.

Third, it is important to develop international relations and North-South relations at the same time for the sake of peace on the Korean peninsula. If we become distracted, it is possible that South Korea will lose its clout in the process of implementing the February 13 agreement, which is an international agreement among six nations. It is necessary to prevent the trilateral (The US, North Korea, China) dissolution of the armistice treaty and a bilateral peace treaty (North Korea, the US). Fortunately, ministerial-level meetings between North and South Korea will be resumed after a seven month hiatus (February 28-March 2). In this ministerial meeting, it would be desirable for issues concerning military trust to be discussed, in addition to just political, economic, and social issues. It is time for the South Korean government and people to make active and strategic efforts.