ARMS CONTROL in the Korean Peninsula: Opportunities and Limitations

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Abstract

The historic first US-DPRK summit on June 12, 2018 in Singapore raised expectation for the peace on the peninsula. And on September 18-20, 2018, the two Koreas held a summit in Pyongyang. Here, the two Koreas agreed to the September Pyongyang Joint Declaration on the implementation of the Panmunjeom Declaration concluded on April 27, 2018, which included practical measures for the expansion and development of inter-Korean relations. Also, as a subsidiary agreement, the agreement in the military sector for the implementation of the Panmunjom Declaration was signed. It includes measures to help mitigate military tensions and build trust between the two Koreas, and to reduce the risk of war on the Korean Peninsula. This is the 9.19 Military Agreement. However, such inter-Korean efforts have not shown any success since the second US-DPRK summit at Hanoi in February 2019. In this situation, this paper examines whether arms control on the Korean peninsula is possible, if it is possible what direction will be effective, and what problems will arise in the process. This study is of great significance because the two Koreas must build trust and arms control for peaceful unification.

[Keywords] Arms Control, National Security, Trust Building, Korean Peninsula, Peace Regime

1. Introduction

It is true that the atmosphere of peace on the Korean Peninsula, which was formed rapidly after the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, gave hope to Korea and the international community. The historic first US-DPRK summit on June 12, 2018 in Singapore raised this expectation further. At the summit, the two leaders largely agreed on four things; establishing a new relationship, establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, denuclearization, and repatriating the dead for US military deaths.

Prior to the meeting between the US-DPRK, the leaders of the two Koreas declared to the world after the summit that a new era of peace has come to the Korean Peninsula through a joint declaration of Panmunjom. Declarations issued by the two Koreas included measures to alleviate military tensions and relieve war risks, halting mutual hostilities, creating peace zones in the DMZ, creating peace zones and preventing accidental collisions in the northern limit line of the West Sea, and occasional military talks between defense officials.

Afterwards, the two Koreas held the 8th Inter-Korean General Military Talks on June 14, 2018 to implement the Panmunjeom Declaration, and agreed to restore the 6.4 agreement to prevent accidental collisions on the West Sea and complete restoration of military communications lines in the East-West Sea region. Then, on June 25, the two sides agreed to normalize the common network of international commercial ships between military communication lines and security...
ships in the East-West Sea region through inter-Korean communication working contacts. On July 31, the 9th military general-level talks were held for further discussions on the implementation of military agreements. The 40th military Working-level talks were held from September 13th to 14th 2018, and the mutual final position was confirmed and the text for the military agreement was coordinated in the talks.

On September 18-20, 2018, the two Koreas held a summit in Pyongyang. Here, the two Koreas agreed to the September Pyongyang Joint Declaration on the implementation of the Panmunjeom Declaration concluded on April 27, 2018, which included practical measures for the expansion and development of inter-Korean relations. Also, as a subsidiary agreement, the agreement in the military sector for the implementation of the Panmunjom Declaration was signed. It includes measures to help mitigate military tensions and build trust between the two Koreas, and to reduce the risk of war on the Korean Peninsula. This is the 9.19 Military Agreement. The September 19th Inter-Korean Military Agreement was reached through two inter-Korean summits, eight document exchanges, and a 17-hour marathon working meeting[1].

Of course, this is not the first time a military agreement has been held between the two Koreas. There are about 10 meaningful agreements made only after the 1990s. Among them, the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement, agreed in December 1991, suspends mutual defamation, destruction, subversion, compliance with the Armistice Agreement, the restriction of force using, the formation and operation of the Joint Military Committee for Inter-Korean Military Forces, and the notification and control of large-scale military movements and military exercises. And, it also included peaceful use of the DMZ and staged disarmament. In addition, the Inter-Korean Nonaggression Agreement, agreed in September 1992, prohibits the use of force in any form, prohibits the use of force, and prohibits the invasion, attack, occupation of the other jurisdiction, the suspension of armed forces and reconnaissance and the blockade of territorial waters and airspace. As such, the two Koreas have consistently concluded military agreements for peace, and this September 19 military agreement seems to be part of an effort to find a more concrete and actionable way rather than a new agreement.

However, such inter-Korean efforts have not shown any success since the second US-DPRK summit at Hanoi in February 2019. As we have seen before, despite many efforts and attempts, the arms control of the Korean peninsula has not achieved much visible results. In this situation, this paper examines whether arms control on the Korean peninsula is possible, if it is possible what direction will be effective, and what problems will arise in the process. This study is of great significance because the two Koreas must build trust and arms control for peaceful unification. To this end, first of all, the concept and type of arms control will be examined and the arms control policy of the Korean peninsula will be evaluated. These assessments include directions and limitations based on situational analysis.

2. The Concepts and Types of Arms Controls

The conceptual definition of arms control varies. According to the logic of Hedlley Bull, which emphasizes the necessity of arms readjustment as a precondition for the balance of power, international security is achievable only if there is a balance of powers, and arms control is required as a condition of balance of power[2]. In this context, A. Ferguson defined arms control as "a concept that includes several weapon enhancements to increase the stability of mutual inhibition from complete disarmament."[3]

On the other hand, there is an interpretation that arms control is focused on the management of military confrontation, with a focus on reducing war and other risks. T. Schelling described arms control as “a variety of forms to limit the possibility of war between potential states, their spread and destructive power in wartime, and military cooperation in peacetime to reduce the cost of political
and economic opportunity in times of war.”[4] L. Bloomfield defined “an effort to reduce, eliminate or minimize the risks and burdens that can arise from arms races by stabilizing or institutionalizing them.”[5]

There are also attempts to understand arms control from a security point of view. Hwang Jin-hwan defines it as to identify, limit, prohibit or reduce the construction, deployment, transfer, operation, and use of specific military forces through unilateral, bilateral or multilateral agreements to ensure military transparency and ultimately to achieve national security.[6] Yong-Sup Han defines “security attainment by reducing or weakening military threats through bilateral or multilateral negotiations in peace.”[7]

The concept of arms control tends to use arms reduction, disarmament, and arms limitations indiscriminately, but in a strict sense it is a term that came after World War II. What was presented before arms control was the concept of ‘arms reduction’ or ‘disarmament’, which was defined in terms of idealism. However, the concept of disarmament, which aims to achieve peace through quantitative reduction of military power, did not alleviate nuclear competition between the US and Soviet Union but rather paradoxically pushed the international community into a spiral of arms buildup. Only after Mutual Assured Destruction(MAD) achieved the ‘balance of fear’, the US-Soviet Union were able to find ways to prevent mutual destruction through arms control and mutual agreement. In this situation, the realist position to achieve even small achievements emerged. The United States and the Soviet Union, while acknowledging their respective security motives, tried to prevent the vicious cycle of arms competition and the possibility of war by making the arms race between the two countries controllable and predictable. This has led countries to prefer ‘arm control’ over ‘disarmament’ in order to ensure the reality and utility of arms control.

As such, the concept of arms control in modern use encompasses “all mutual military cooperation activities aiming for military stability by securing military transparency and building mutual military trust and transparency rather than the concept of disarmament to eliminate weapons immediately.” In other words, it is assumed that arms control should be pursued in the context of stabilizing the balance of power and reducing the temptation of war. In this sense, a term of arms control can generically include arms reduction, arms limitation, disarmament, arms management, confidence building measures(CBM), arms freeze. Here, armament reduction or arms reduction refers to the quantitative reduction of already built military forces, ie., weapons or troops in possession, and armament limitation means to limit the military power in a quantitative or qualitative manner. Disarmament refers to the complete dismantling of the military forces, and it can be said that the victorious country completely disarms the losing country. Armament management is a term commonly used in Japan, and it is not the result of finding a more neutral concept by using control or reduction to express a negative effect on the construction of military forces, but it is not a commonly used term. Building military confidence refers to all measures to reduce risk and facilitate crisis management by increasing the predictability of opponents’ military actions, and freeze means stopping further development at the current level. In general, when the terms disarmament and arms control are used, although arms control is used as a broader concept encompassing disarmament, arms control is not a higher concept than disarmament. However, when using disarmament in a narrow sense to reduce military size, it can be said that arms control is a broader concept than disarmament.

There are three main purposes for arms control. First, arms control has the primary purpose of reducing war threats through ‘strategic balance’. Unstable arms race raises the possibility of war. Thus, the purpose of arms control is to stabilize the arms race and increase military stability or strategic stability, thereby suppressing war. Second, reducing the magnitude of damage during a war is an important goal. If a war breaks out after arms control has taken place, it is possible that the war would be significantly less damaging than a war that broke out in the absence of arms control. Restricting the operation, deployment, and construction of military capabilities, which are instrumental to expanding violence, can also reduce war avoidance. Third, by reducing military expenditures through arms control, economic costs can be diverted to other purposes.
Armament control for this comprehensive purpose can be classified into various horizontally and vertically. First, as a horizontal classification, arms control can be classified into various types according to the number of participating countries, weapon types, controlled objects, approaches, controls, and mandatoryness[8]. Second, the arms control by control subjects can be divided into five vertically; 'control of military force development, manufacture and possession', 'prohibition of military force use and experiment', 'prohibition and restriction on military force deployment', 'restriction of military force operation', and 'prohibition and control of international transfer.'

Third, arms control can be roughly divided into operational arms control and structural arms control. Operational arms control here means controlling the operation and deployment of military forces. This is an approach that considers many wars in the past to be caused by misunderstandings, miscalculations, and mutual distrust[7]. Thus, it suggests that the possibility of war could be reduced if we can increase transparency and predictability of military intentions by decreasing these causes of war. Operational arms control focuses on increasing predictability by demonstrating the lack of willingness to surprise attacks and war provocations by permitting the transparent disclosure and verification of military activities and military deployments to opponents. To this end, military operations will be exposed to the public to enhance transparency in military activities and to monitor each other to eliminate the possibility of surprise attacks. It also includes 'constrains measures' in operational arms control, which relocate forward deployed military forces to the rear, assuming that separating conflicting military forces from one another reduces the likelihood of surprise attacks and wars.

Structural arms control, on the other hand, refers to the control of the size and structure of military forces. It focuses on military build-up, limiting mobilization, restricting the use of specific weapons in specific regions, weapons production and transfer regulations[8]. This can include freezes, establishing ceilings and preventing arms build-up, restricting the use of certain types of weapons or firepower, and reductions in the disposal of certain percentages or quantities of weapons[7].

Fourth, arms control can be classified into three types; military confidence building, restriction measures(or military restrictions), and arms reduction. Operational arms control is divided into military confidence building and restriction measures, and arms reduction means structural arms control[7]. For example, in order for the two Koreas to end the arms race and enter into arms control and disarmament, this is a claim that “action for trust building” should be the first priority.

3. The Assessment of Arms Control in the Peninsula

3.1. The assessment of arms control environment

The arms control environment of the Korean Peninsula has the following characteristics in terms of threat perception between North and South Korea, North Korea's nuclear development, strategy and force structure, and security situation of Northeast Asia. These factors are increasing the need for arms control between the two Koreas, but the influence is in the direction of suppressing rather than promoting arms control.

First, the asymmetry of mutual distrust is at work between the two Koreas. The most important historical memory is the psychological asymmetry of the Korean War[9]. The historical memory of the war left a deep rooted distrust that could not be resolved between the two Koreas, which made the disarmament proposal of the other side recognize as a peaceful offensive in terms of political propaganda. As a result, both political and military leaders became aware of a negative culture of arms control and realized that arms control was just a trick to deceive. The ideological confrontation between the two Koreas, which continues even after the end of the Cold War, has hindered the building of confidence. If the situation changes despite the temporary inter-Korean reconciliation, it has a sensitive influence on the inter-Korean relations and arms control negotiations.
Second, asymmetry of threat perception works between the two Koreas[10]. South Korea regards North Korea as the biggest threat, but North Korea sees the US as its main threat rather than South Korea. This makes the approach of conventional arms control between the two Koreas virtually difficult. In other words, since North Korea recognizes the US military capabilities as a core threat, it has consistently focused on disarmament measures, including the phased withdrawal of US troops. On the other hand, South Korea recognizes North Korea’s surprise attack and the threat of the Seoul metropolitan area as its main threats, and has focused on building confidence between two Koreas[9]. Moreover, the two Koreas take a different approach to arms control, creating mutual distrust. South Korea sees arms control as a means of peace settlement, while North Korea is suspected of its intention to use it as a means of reunification under communism after the withdrawal of US forces.

Third, there is geo-strategic asymmetry between the two Koreas. They have different geo-strategic locations in Seoul and Pyongyang, their respective capitals. Thus, the level and perception of vulnerability to the ‘strategic center’ of North and South Korea is significantly different. From the North Korean point of view, it is easy to use the threat to attack Seoul as political and military pressure, while in South Korea this acts as a fatal weakness. At the same time, there is an asymmetry between North and South Korean society. South Korea has a dense socio-economic network centered on the metropolitan area. If it implements operational armament control, such as relocating forward artillery and mechanized units to the rear or restricting training and deployment, this is likely to lead directly to disarmament. And, in the Seoul metropolitan area, there is not enough space to deploy troops, but also the social consultation process takes a long time. Thus, if the situation changes rapidly and needs to be restored, it is difficult to restore the military posture different from North Korea.

Fourth, there is asymmetry in military capabilities between the two Koreas. North Korea developed weapons of mass destruction, such as nuclear weapons and missiles, causing a serious imbalance in military capabilities between the two Koreas. In the conventional field, North Korea has a ‘quantitative advantage’ over South Korea, but South Korea has been offsetting North Korea's quantitative advantage as a ‘qualitative advantage’ in terms of conventional weapons. Due to the asymmetry of the military capabilities between the two Koreas, the priority required by each of the arms control is also different. South Korea has focused on North Korea’s ability to threaten the Seoul metropolitan area and reduce weapons of mass destruction, while North Korea has focused on reducing South Korea's military modernization and weakening US influence. Above all, North Korea’s nuclear development since the 1990s has caused US-DPRK conflicts and has resulted in the neglect of arms control negotiations and implementation between the two Koreas.

Lastly, the arms race in Northeast Asia, which is in progress around the Korean Peninsula, has further complicated conventional arms control between the two Koreas. It seems that the United States and China have not yet deviated significantly from the trend of maintaining the status quo on the Korean Peninsula, but recently China has been visualizing a move to expand their geopolitical interests on the Korean Peninsula. The US also seems to be re-examining the global strategic value of the Korean Peninsula in order to lead a long-term competitive system with China at the Indo-Pacific strategy[11]. In other words, the US and China are fiercely competing for the maintenance and expansion of influence by putting North Korea’s denuclearization issue at the forefront. The traditional military arms control system between North and South Korea, which should be envisioned in the mid- to long-term, has to take into account the power structure surrounded peninsula, so it is inevitable to think about how to set appropriate arms control goals in relation to the proper power posture and scale.

3.2. Goals and approaches in arms control between two Koreas

Until now, the two Koreas had to face difficulties in the implementation phase despite a considerable agreement. Recently, in the September 19, 2018 Military Agreement, the two Koreas...
agreed mostly on agendas to be discussed by the Military Joint Committee. The specific implementation and verification of the agenda were all delegated to the Joint Military Commission, but it has not yet been held. In the past, the second meeting of the North and South Korean Defense Ministers was held in November 2007, but only the consensus on the need to establish trust and the need to hold a joint inter-Korean investigation committee was not implemented.

The reason why the agreement on arms control between the two Koreas goes to the implementation stage and suffers difficulties is because the approach to arms control between them is fundamentally different from each other. South Korea draws lessons from its European experience in conventional arms control, aiming at ultimate goals in national security, peace coexistence and peace unification[12]. With these lessons, it has focused on building inter-Korean military trust, preventing war due to misunderstandings and miscalculations, preventing surprise attacks and possible all-out wars, and asymmetric disarmament to reduce North Korea's dominant power[7]. South Korea puts emphasis on establishing trust as a preliminary step toward arms control, assuming that North Korea's intention to invade will remain unchanged. Thus it has taken a step-by-step approach; “trust building and reducing tension → Improving inter-Korean relations and implementing military trust → Restriction and reduction of military power → Peace coexistence system established.”

On the other hand, North Korea has continuously insisted on reducing military spending on the Korean Peninsula by strengthening its military power and making the withdrawal of the USFK as its primary precondition. In other words, North Korea intends to use the arms control as a mechanism to remove the US influence on the Korean Peninsula, reduce and withdraw US military forces, weaken and eliminate US nuclear deterrence, and maintain its superiority over South Korea[7]. In addition, North Korea attempted to ameliorate the strategically disadvantaged situation by using a nuclear development card, and in this regard, it succeeded in exchanging the team spirit practice with the nuclear card in 1991. As such, North Korea is believed to have been using arms control as a means of earning time and achieving their security interests while temporarily holding offensive military policies when the situation becomes unfavorable.

It is estimated that the difference between North and South Korea's views on arms control and its approach has not changed since the 2000s. Even after the 2000s, the gap between the two Koreas did not narrow in terms of issues related to the peace agreement, USFK, and trust-building measures linked to conventional arms control. First of all, with regard to the peace regime, South Korea actually showed that it could be concluded under peace conditions, but North Korea has argued to replace the Armistice Agreement with the Peace Agreement between the US and DPRK.

In addition, the perception of the status and role of the USFK was also different. South Korea has a position that the existence of the USFK is essential as long as a security threat exists and the issue of the withdrawal of USFK is a problem to be resolved between the alliance. On the other hand, North Korea insisted that the top priority of the policy toward the United States is to withdraw their troops stationed in South Korea[7].

Under this perception, South Korea, as an approach to establishing military trust, emphasizes ties with political, economic, social, and cultural exchange and cooperation to ease tensions on the Korean Peninsula and solidify peace. However, North Korea first signed a peace agreement between the United States and North Korea and insisted that it should establish military trust between the two Koreas after the military security is secured. In the conventional arms reduction issue, South Korea maintained the principle of resolution between the two Koreas, while North Korea continued to condemn the US “isolation policy” and attempted to link it with the withdrawal of the USFK.
3.3. Limitations of arms control in the peninsula

The existing arms control policy that has been implemented between the two Koreas has several problems in terms of approach. First, based on their experiences, there have been a number of limitations in the role and function of conventional arms control between North and South Korea. Despite many agreements, South Korea has not been able to use it as a sufficient mechanism to deter North Korea’s military provocations through conventional arms control efforts. In the 1990s and 2000s, North Korea launched military provocations against South Korea to achieve their political goals, and strained the South Korean government and the military. Nevertheless, South Korea is considered to have constituted an arms control policy with theoretical and ideal contents and systems, while overlooking the realistic conditions affecting it. In addition, although South Korea’s arms control policy varies depends on the government, it has shown an error that tends to aim at itself rather than as a means to achieve the goal.

Meanwhile, it is true that South Korea brought excessive expectations and optimism to the functions and roles of conventional arms control, including building military confidence, to provide a breakthrough in improving inter-Korean relations in the face of intense tensions. However, the reality has not reached the most basic goal of arms control, which is to prevent military conflict.

Second, North Korea’s ongoing nuclear development ambitions make it difficult to control arms. Although the 1991 Fundamental Agreement between two Koreas contains an agreement on innovative and comprehensive arms control measures, the crucial factor that has not been implemented to date is due to the North Korean nuclear issue. This is also the reason why arms control efforts and agreements have been delayed in the 2000s. South Korea's arms control is based on the dual attitude that conventional arms control is a matter that is dealt with between North and South Korea and nuclear arms control between North America. South Korea had the intention of establishing conditions for the peace regime on the Korean Peninsula while leading South Korea in terms of conventional arms control. But this effort led to a deadlock due to conflicts and tensions between North Korea and the US over denuclearization. In fact, the North Korean nuclear issue has had a decisive effect on the negotiations and implementation of arms control between the two Koreas. Therefore, from the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s to the second crisis in the 2000s, and until Kim Jong-un came to power in 2012, it has been recognized that progress in arms control cannot be expected without solving the North Korean nuclear development problem.

Third, South Korea has not been able to properly use the difficult internal and external security environment facing North Korea since the 1990s. North Korea has been assessed as having no opportunity to rebuild its own national economy without external capital and technology investments before and after the hardships of the 1990s. In the midst of this, the North Korean regime desperately felt threats within the system, such as the struggle for power and the relaxation of the social system. In this regard, it also used a survival strategy to divert the internal threat to the outside by inflating the external threat excessively. For example, North Korea insisted that its military build-up is a legitimate self-defense measure against external threats, and that the increase in armament, including nuclear weapons, is the only way to abandon US hostile policies to crush them.

Even in the Kim Jong-un era, North Korea emphasized the nuclear-economic virtuous cycle on the front while claiming the ‘Byeong Jin’ Policy which is nuclear and economy could be developed simultaneously. Of course, in reality, the economic-security dilemma was invited to deepen. In order to take advantage of this dilemma in South Korea’s arms control, it seems that South Korea has attempted to use the arms control issue as a leverage for negotiations in terms of national security strategy. However, such efforts have failed to show great results, because of
interlocking with the structure of international relations surrounding North Korea’s survival, suspicion of the North Korean regime, unilateral nuclear upgrade policy, and South Korea’s inconsistent North Korea policy.

4. Conclusion

Negotiations to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula are still stagnant. On October 5, 2019, North Korea and the United States said they would resume negotiations, but they did not achieve much. In fact, there are both positive expectations and negative concerns about negotiations. However, one thing that is clear here is that everyone who makes such predictions admits that it is the most desirable way for the Korean peninsula to go beyond trust-building and to settle in peace. From this point of view, the 9.19 military agreement, which has achieved a series of results, can be said to be more meaningful than any other agreement ever signed between the two Koreas. GPs on both sides of the north and south were destroyed, and the symbol of division, JSA, was disarmed. And since the agreement, there has been no conventional military conflict between the two Koreas. If the agreement could be implemented and verified 100%, the possibility of an accidental collision between the two Koreas would almost disappear.

However, it is true that the progress of the military agreement between North and South Korea is currently being influenced by negotiations between the North and the US. As mentioned earlier, the conventional arms control currently being pursued by North and South Korea is closely related to nuclear negotiations between North America. In other words, North Korea and the United States are pursuing nuclear negotiations, and South and North Korea are pursuing conventional arms control, so North Korea has no choice but to link them. Therefore, Korea is forced to admit it.

In this situation, South Korea needs to establish clear standards and a strategic approach for the future arms control. In other words, it is necessary to promote arms control from a long-term and complex perspective. Of course, pursuing arms control should not weaken military power, but should be paralleled with building military power for the future.

Also, rather than narrowing the issue of the Korean Peninsula to the problems of the North and South Koreas, it will be necessary to promote arms control at the regional level and further try to establish a regional multilateral security system.

In order to more effectively implement the current stagnant 9.19 military agreement in more detail, it is necessary to organize the inter-Korean joint military committee as a top priority to promote the implementation of the agreement. In addition, measures should be taken to ensure that the implementation of military agreements is institutionalized. At the same time, it will be necessary to recognize that the implementation of the South-North Korea military agreement is not just a matter of inter-Korean relations, and to derive the role of the United States and even China, and demand implementation. This process could eventually have a positive effect, dispelling concerns over the inter-Korean military agreement.

Looking back at the history, the question “Can we really trust the Kim Jong-un regime in North Korea?” still remains deep. However, we all know that if we can solve the problem on the Korean Peninsula peacefully, that is the best way. It is also because we know peace using force is hurting us too much. Therefore, we need to find a way to make the peaceful process that has begun now a more meaningful outcome, and we need to try to do so. One important point here is that the defense should always be prepared. Because it can settle peace faster and make it stronger.
5. References

5.1. Journal articles


5.2. Books


5.3. Additional references


6. Contribution

6.1. Authors contribution

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