세종연구소 THE SEJONG INSTITUTE Sejong Commentary 세종논평

"China factor" in U.S.-DPRK Negotiations: Why China Also Needs to Make Concessions for the Declaration of Ending the Korean War?

No. 2018-43(2018.10.05)

이 성 현 (세종연구소 통일전략연구실장)
sunnybbsfs@gmail.com

China is fully aware the U.S. is reluctant to officially discuss the issue of declaration of ending the Korean War (한국전 종전선언) with North Korea because of China itself. Both the U.S. and China view such a declaration from the perspectives of their geopolitical interests, which boils down to the question of the U.S. Forces Korea (hereafter, USFK, 주한미군).

As the negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington have stagnated with the issue of the declaration of such importance, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un recently displayed his willingness to make a significant concession. He told Chung Eui-yong (정의용), director of South Korea's National Security Office and a special envoy to North Korea, that "the declaration has nothing to do with the withdrawal of the USFK and the U.S.-ROK military alliance." The real problem, however, lies with China that increasingly competes with the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific region and, particularly, in Northeast Asia.

Geopolitically, strategically and structurally, the presence of the USFK is often described as a "dagger" to China's throat. The U.S. seems uncertain about the future consequences of its signing and even endorsing of such a declaration with North Korea because doing so would unwittingly or inevitably serves as a convenient "justification" for China to demand the withdrawal of the USFK.

In rationalizing the presence of the USFK, the U.S. had referred to the "North Korean threat," which was also cited when it deployed a THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile battery in South Korea. Despite this, China opposed the deployment at the very top leadership level because it believed the U.S. missile shield would jeopardize its regional strategy. Similarly, the U.S. recognizes a formal end to the Korean War would seriously undermine its strategic landscape in the Korean Peninsula, which has become "East Asia's Balkans," where powerful countries' interests frequently converge and collide.

The end of the Korean War would signify that a new "peace regime" will replace the current "armistice" arrangement that has lasted more than a half-century and the ROK-U.S. combined military exercises and war games on the Korean Peninsula will no longer be needed. Following this logic, China is likely to demand the USFK's withdrawal, by raising a very compelling proposition that "the Korean War is finally over. Now the peace regime is settled on the Korean Peninsula. It is a new era of peace. It means no more military tensions and no needs for maintaining the U.S. protection. Then, why would the U.S. troops wish to stay?"

During the summit between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un in the Chinese city of Dalian (大連), it was understood that Xi allegedly requested Kim

to side with the Chinese stance on the issue of the USFK (And this is also consistent with Trump's loud and open speculation that "China was behind").

When it comes to the declaration of ending the Korean War, China has never changed its official stance that it must be included not only as a signatory party but also as an active participant in all processes, despite Xi's reported remarks at a recent forum in Vladivostok that some observers misinterpreted. As a party to the Korean War Armistice, China wishes to be engaged with the "entire process" of peacemaking on the Korean Peninsula from the declaration of ending the war, even if it may be only symbolic, to the formal peace treaty.

The reason why China is obsessed with such a declaration stems partially from its deep emotional attachment to the Korean War. The critical question, however, should be whether China would be a "spoiler" once Seoul and Washington, not to mention Pyongyang, decide to allow Beijing's representation in the process. This should be at the heart of policy analysis for South Korea that has been increasingly experiencing considerable discord, friction, and even tension with China regarding the latter's participation in the peace process on the Korean Peninsula.

The prevailing view is that China demands to participate in the peace process because it wishes to ensure its voice heard, and its position reflected. It is also widely believed that the Beijing leadership seeks to maximize its nfluence by complicating and delaying the negotiation process. The more fundamental question that must deserve even greater attention is whether China itself supports to put an end to the Korean War.

Surprisingly, the Chinese government remains reticent. In his visit to New York last week, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi (王毅)remarked that "the declaration would help build basic trust between the U.S. and North Korea and facilitate denuclearization" but did not clarify how the matter relates to China itself. Perhaps the answer is right there, in China's keeping a low profile about the issue. In other words, China believes the end of the war is beneficial to its own strategic gains. That is the reason that China does not say as much.

China believes the end-of-war declaration, albeit symbolic, would serve as a prelude to reduction of regular U.S. drills and downsizing of U.S. military deployment. China would expect that the "diminished" presence of the U.S. power projection would benefit China's broader and fundamental strategy in the region. It would therefore go against China's interest to disrupt the peace process.

China would be very much content, insofar as it is invited to be in the room as a quiet "observer," yet without labeling as such. That would suffice to save face to the domestic audience. However, for China to participate in the peace negotiations, it must also yield something. The U.S. says North Korean steps for denuclearization so far are not adequate. The U.S. deliberately delays declaring an end to the war with China in mind, in order to give another implicit signal to Beijing.

주 소: 경기도 성남시 수정구 대왕판교로 851번길 20 세종연구소
홈페이지: http://www.sejong.org
문 의: commentary@sejong.org