

NEA-NWFZ 3+3: Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone

The current balance of power in Northeast Asia and the establishment of a NEA-NWFZ 3+3 (positive and negative security assurances) can coexist and harmonize from the start of treaty negotiations

The cold war ended in 1989, but we are still at war in Northeast Asia. The 38th parallel armistice line which has been dividing Koreans since 1953 now represents a new cold war: ROK (South Korea), Japan, and the US on the South, and DPRK (North Korea), China, Russia on the North. The current balance of power is essentially based on the US extended nuclear deterrence for ROK and Japan, and DPRK's nuclear arsenals.

Now, North Korea's response to the question of why it pursues nuclear armament has been straightforward and consistent. DPRK considers nuclear deterrent capability as the ultimate means of national security. This is a rationale shared by all nuclear-armed nations. On October 3, 2006, in a DPRK Foreign Ministry statement announcing a nuclear test, it said " North Korea's nuclear weapons serve as a reliable deterrent from U.S. aggression. The nations without a reliable deterrent would face tragic demise, and its sovereignty is trampled upon."

At the same time, Russian President Putin's suggestion of using nuclear weapons in the early stages of the Ukraine invasion sparked a global reaction, culminating in the G20 leaders' statement (November 2022) stating, "The use or threat of use of nuclear weapons cannot be tolerated." In this context, attention is once again turning to the Northeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NEA-NWFZ) 3+3 comprehensive approach proposed by Morton Halperin, a former advisor to President Clinton. The 3+3 approach involves the creation of a non-nuclear zone by North and south Korea and Japan, and the provision of negative security assurances by the United States, China, and Russia, pledging not to use or threaten the area by nuclear weapons.

The NEA-NWFZ 3+3 comprehensive approach includes declarations of non-hostile intentions between the U.S. and North Korea, the cessation of economic sanctions, the end of the Korean War, the creation of a permanent regional security council, mutual economic and energy support among regional nations, the dismantling of the Korean UN forces, and the signing of the Northeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty.

The treaty should allow flexibility. For instance, if only the five nations excluding North Korea ratify the treaty, it will still come into effect. However, in such a scenario, if North Korea does not show progress toward treaty ratification, such as committing to the disposal of nuclear weapons and related facilities within a specified period of 3 to 5 years, both Japan and South Korea reserve the right to withdraw from the treaty. Each step specified in the treaty will undergo verification by international institutions.

As a result of the treaty ratification, the six nations of Japan, South Korea, North Korea, China, Russia, and the US can establish a common position on nuclear issues, departing from the current situation. Namely, North Korea, relying on its own nuclear deterrence, Japan and South

Korea, wanting to ensure the effective extended deterrence of U.S., the U.S. aiming to curb the nuclear proliferation with rogue states and international terrorist organizations, and China and Russia seeking to restrain the nuclearization of Japan and South Korea. These six nations can address the nuclear threat based on a shared position outlined by a regional treaty – three non-nuclear states constituting the nuclear-weapon-free zone and three nuclear-armed states providing negative security assurances.

The current balance of power in Northeast Asia and the establishment of NEA-NWFZ 3+3: the positive and negative security assurances can coexist and harmonize from the start of treaty negotiations. For successful negotiation, it is crucial to understand two aspects: First, comprehensive proposals are necessary beyond denuclearization of North Korea. Second, the treaty's negotiation would take a long time, probably decades of dialogue, diplomacy, and confidence building.

There is an intriguing fact regarding the English translation of the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration, a joint statement of the summit meeting between ROK President Moon Jae-in and DPRK leader Kim Jong-un. While the original is in Korean, the official English translation by ROK states "realizing a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula," whereas the DPRK translation reads "transforming the Korean Peninsula into a non-nuclear zone." If North Korea used the term "non-nuclear zone" to describe the situation of complete denuclearization with security guarantees, it aligns precisely with the international concept of a nuclear-weapon-free zone, capturing the essence of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula.

Currently, North and South Korea are unable to communicate in the military level, raising the risk of nuclear use due to misunderstandings, misconceptions, or accidental actions. Instead of assuming that North Korea has no intention of denuclearization, it may be the opportune time to reopen six-party talks on the NEA-NWFZ 3+3 comprehensive approach, foster trust-building towards the treaty's enactment, and strive for sustainable regional peace. (806 words)