

Inter-Korean Military Agreement in 2018: Implications and Outlook¹

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The huge achievement that two Koreas made in 2018 was apparently historical and dramatic enough to evoke enormous expectation for a fundamental change of the bilateral relation, from hostility toward peaceful coexistence. Although all agreements and statements after Panmunjom Declaration committed both countries to “more active cooperation, exchanges, visits and contacts,” this paper will mostly focus on the “Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain,” hereafter referred to as the “Inter-Korean Military Agreement,” since the agreement adopted on September 19, 2018 contains the most substantial implications for a future possible change, as well as some practical limitations simultaneously.

Unfortunately the recent development of the situation on the peninsula seems quite volatile again, as we can clearly notice from the DPRK’s short-range missile launches last month along with their harsh criticism towards the ROK military and authorities. In this vein, this author would like to draw out a rough analysis about what calculus Pyongyang has in mind at this point and in which direction two Koreas might be moving in terms of the rule-maturing or implementation process of the Inter-Korean Military Agreement.

I . Reinterpretation from the Perspective of Deterrence Theory

Seen through the lens of deterrence theory, the core aspiration of the Inter-Korean Military Agreement is to transform the conduct of military deterrence aimed at each other from “escalation dominance” into “escalation management.” Escalation management is a strategic approach to controlling the scale of escalation at lower levels and keeping capable adversaries deterred at lower levels of conflict with calculated measures such as communication rather than changing the adversary’s cost-benefit analysis with the prospects for massive retaliation at any given escalation level based on overwhelming military force.

This stands in contrast to the concept of “proactive deterrence” or the “action-after-reporting” posture that gained predominance in the ROK government previously. The premise of the Lee administration’s “proactive deterrence” was based on the concept of “escalation dominance” under which one power uses the threat of inflicting unacceptable damage upon the aggressor with overwhelming destructive capability against any aggression. The “action-after-reporting” posture of the Park administration also exponentially raises the possibility and level of retaliatory measures by allowing the Field Commander to have the say on escalation options.

¹ This article is a developed version of the author’s recent publication “North Korea’s Latest Short-Range Missile Tests: Intentions and Calculations,” in *IFANS FOUCS Series* (Seoul: Korea National Diplomatic Academy, May 2019). However, the views expressed here are those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of IFANS or KNDA.

Although this way of deterrence helps easily dissuade the would-be aggressor from an attack by means of threat of reprisal, it has also a serious downside that any accidental conflict can erupt into all-out war quite easily. The criticisms regarding "slippery escalation" could be found quite frequently from the US expert and policymaking community those days.² The United Nations Command and US Armed Forces in Korea appeared to have concerns about this possibility as well, and that may be a reason why they are backing inter-Korean efforts at the implementation of the Agreement.

Under this framework of escalation management, the Agreement is aimed at minimizing the possibility of confrontations and streamlining communication through the implementation of the following key provisions. First, the two sides agreed to establish the "Inter-Korean Joint Military Committee" to consult on various implementation measures of the following provisions. Second, the two sides agreed to cease various military exercises aimed at each other along the Military Demarcation Line (MDL). Third, the two sides agreed to designate No Fly Zones for all aircraft types above the MDL. The two sides agreed to completely withdraw all Guard Posts (GP) that lie within 1km of each other as a preliminary measure to withdrawing all GPs within the DMZ. Fourth, the two sides agreed to demilitarize the Joint Security Area. The two sides also agreed to establish a maritime peace zone around the North Limited Line (NLL) in the West Sea.

However, it is also true that the Agreement contains a possible loophole or a point of ambiguity. Although the two sides produced a comprehensive agreement to prevent armed conflict, such as Article 1 of the Agreement that states the two sides agreed to completely cease all hostile acts against each other in every domain, including land, air and sea that are the source of military tension and conflict, the Agreement was short on specifics on how the two sides will perceive and respond to military exercises conducted outside the respective areas surrounding the MDL. Since the two sides have yet to establish the "Inter-Korean Joint Military Committee" as agreed, they have no option but to rely on their arbitrary interpretations in defining the scope of acceptable military exercises they respectively conduct. Of course, challenges arise more fundamentally from stalled nuclear talks with only structurally limited options left on the table.

II. Pyongyang's Recent Calculus around Short Range Missile Launches

On this score, Pyongyang's ulterior motive for the latest test-firing of projectiles/missiles in May is to secure maximum political space in negotiating how to end hostilities, the issue that remains relatively unaddressed and vague in the Agreement. More specifically, Pyongyang is intent on arguing that the tests of multiple rocket launchers, self-propelled artillery, and short-range missiles are not in violation of its agreement with Seoul. Pyongyang's idea is that if Seoul considers short-range missile tests to be violation of the agreement, the South should suspend planned military exercises or weapon system acquisition projects.

² For example, Abraham M. Denmark, "Proactive Deterrence: The Challenges of Escalation Control on the Korean Peninsula," in *Academic Paper Series* (Washington D.C.: Korea Economic Institute, December 2011).

With clear awareness that this is an unlikely scenario, Pyongyang would leverage the situation to its advantage. That is, the latest launches were part of Pyongyang's rule setting efforts in future nuclear negotiations, conducting short-range missile tests and military exercises that do not fall within the category of ▲nuclear weapons and medium-/long-range missiles that Pyongyang had tacitly agreed with Washington to stop testing as well as of ▲military exercises along the MDL agreed in the Agreement.

Although it is true that North Korean state media outlets have amplified critical voices of the South's key military exercises and acquisition of weapons systems for violating the Agreement from the very next moment of adoption, it is noteworthy that such criticism sharply escalated in April this year, namely after the failure of the DPRK-US summit in Hanoi. In a statement issued on April 25, the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK), the North Korean intelligence apparatus dedicated to Pyongyang's policy toward Seoul, said that the joint US-ROK air force drill from April 22 is directly against the Inter-Korean Military Agreement.

With that being said, North Korea's message is crystal-clear. Although the US and the South scaled back their joint military exercises, their continued presence serves to legitimize Pyongyang's long-range artillery and short-range missile tests. In other words, Pyongyang is trying to define the recent tests as a balancing act with the suspended deployment of US strategic assets and resumed tactical military exercises by categorizing medium-/long-range missiles into its strategic assets and other weapons into tactical guided ones.

North Korea also widely publicized the test through the state-run media. The front page of *The Rodong Sinmun* on May 10 was packed with 16 photographs showing Kim Jong-un overseeing the testing, and 6 of them showed the indigenously developed North Korean version of Russia's Iskander missile system. Another factor to consider is that the Iskander bears a resemblance to South Korea's Hyunmoo-2B, a short-range, solid-fueled ballistic missile in terms of physical specifications including size, weight, and performance. In other words, the North's argument is that the South has already developed and deployed a short-range ballistic missile that appears superficially to be identical to its Iskander-like missile.

To sum up, North Korea's recent short-range missile launches seem more like a useful political chip loaded with various implications of Russia's Iskander in Europe, than a new wild card showing that it crossed another technological threshold. By describing the weapon system that could function as North Korea's strategic asset at its convenience as a "tactical guided weapon," Pyongyang is trying to injecting tacitly its own rules to Seoul. To be more specific, Pyongyang is demanding Seoul to choose between accepting its short-missile drills and ending the US-ROK joint military exercises altogether. Therefore, Pyongyang's real intention is to exercise considerable latitude in conducting future tests and military exercises.

III. Assessment and Outlook: Escalation Management Revisited

Apparently, the unfolding situation has been playing out against the key provisions agreed in the

2018 inter-Korean summit. Pyongyang seemed to have factored the prospects for protracted nuclear negotiations into its calculations. The Kim regime is clearly sending a message that inter-Korean relations in the face of stalled nuclear talks will be different from 2018 when the mood for a détente was created. With regard to its relations with Washington, however, it appears that Pyongyang does not want to go through a tense period again as in 2017 when Washington and Pyongyang exchanged threats. This means that Pyongyang would brace itself for protracted nuclear negotiations by re-calibrating its strategy to maintain a certain amount of tensions in inter-Korean relations without unnecessarily provoking Washington.

Drawing on the logical implications, there are three possible scenarios for inter-Korean relations after the latest missile test. First, Seoul and Pyongyang could exchange hostile rhetorics and responses to their respective military exercises. If that is the case, major provisions agreed between the two Koreas in 2018 including the Inter-Korean Military Agreement would gradually become null and void. Second, the two sides could opt for literal interpretation of the Inter-Korean Military Agreement, sticking only to ceasing military exercises along the Military Demarcation Line (MDL). If they do so, the major inter-Korean agreements made in 2018 would end up making a limited contribution to improving inter-Korean relations by preventing accidental sparking of armed conflict. The third scenario posits the establishment of the "Inter-Korean Joint Military Committee" to negotiate in a detailed manner the levels and specifics of future military exercises. The best possible outcome in this case would be the two sides agreeing to ex-ante notification and respective observation of military exercises or tests. The relevant precedent of this would be the Stockholm Agreement during the Cold War era in Europe.

What matters now is Pyongyang's will. As mentioned earlier, Pyongyang has added complications to the current picture by not responding to Seoul's call for establishing the "Inter-Korean Joint Military Committee." Therefore, Seoul is currently left with the first and second scenarios. And with the prospects for protracted nuclear negotiations in which a diplomatic tug of war should be played, it would not be Pyongyang's priority anymore to play a political game and create the mood for the détente with Seoul. It is more likely that Pyongyang would view a certain level of tensions as its leverage in future dealings.

Ironically, however, North Korea's recent moves remind us of the importance of the Inter-Korean Military Agreement. Considering the recent shift in Pyongyang's strategic calculations, "escalation management" can be more useful than before in minimizing the possibility of armed conflict along the MDL and NLL. Metaphorically, "escalation management" measures could function as a safety valve designed to minimize any risk jeopardizing inter-Korean relations during protracted nuclear negotiations. It is premature to underestimate the effectiveness of the Agreement. It would be more reasonable to come up with tangible ways to mitigate the potential for accidental escalation and harness the framework of the Agreement as an institutional tool to push Pyongyang for the establishment of the "Inter-Korean Joint Military Committee."

Translated by KIM Leia