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# [Column] Balanced leadership needed for peace on the Korean Peninsula

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**Robust national security and the willingness to wage war are not enough to guarantee peace**



President Yoon Suk-yeol speaks during a briefing by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of National Defense held at the Blue House guesthouse on Jan. 11. (courtesy of the presidential office)



**By Moon Chung-in, chairman of the Sejong Institute**

As we enter 2023, South Korea faces the onslaught of two crises at once in the areas of national security and the economy.

The more worrisome of the two is the security crisis, which has been covered in both the domestic and international media. A much-discussed article in the Financial Times that came out just before the Lunar New Year suggested that the chances of surviving a war on the Korean Peninsula are “slightly better than zero” and that “there would be almost no possibility of getting out of the capital.”

Think that’s just a groundless rumor? I see it as fully plausible given the aggressive steps taken by Pyongyang toward building its nuclear arsenal and missile assets in 2022.

The South Korean government’s response has been stern. “Developing definite capabilities for massive retaliation — enabling us to strike back against an attack a hundredfold or a thousandfold — is the most important way of preventing an attack,” said South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol during an annual work report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of National Defense that was held at the Blue House guesthouse on Jan. 11.

The preemptive strike doctrine is already almost a given.

“If North Korea’s provocations grow more intense, the Republic of Korea could [allow the US to] deploy tactical nuclear weapons or could develop nuclear weapons itself. In that case, we could acquire our own [nuclear weapons] in a short time using our technology,” Yoon also said.

“Peace that is based on the goodwill of the other side and a declaration that the war is over is a false peace that is unsustainable. Nations that have depended upon a false peace have vanished into the pages of history, while those that have sought peace through strength have contributed to human civilization while cultivating their own culture,” Yoon stressed in his opening remarks.

This stance on peace — echoing the philosophical position of the Roman strategist Vegetius, who famously said, “If you want peace, prepare for war” — is harsher than that articulated by any previous South Korean administration.

However, the current administration’s policy of acquiring peace by sapping North Korea’s very desire to commit provocations through overwhelming strength carries with it an inherent security dilemma. While Seoul threatens hundredfold and thousandfold retribution and builds up overwhelming military superiority, Pyongyang will counter by augmenting its own forces, both conventional and strategic — that is, nuclear.

That will inflame the arms race on the Korean Peninsula and further raise the grave possibility of an unintended clash. Pyongyang will never stop suspecting that peace as Vegetius conceived it is achieved not through negotiations and compromise, but through the kind of war waged on Carthage: invasion, devastation and conquest.

National security is a necessary condition for peace, but it can’t be a sufficient condition. Military deterrence and alliances are essential for security, but they don’t guarantee peace itself because they are predicated on the continuation of the external threat. Furthermore, it’s doubtful whether the peace that comes after war, mass destruction, devastation, and victory can even be called true peace.

In that respect, I would describe the Yoon administration’s pursuit of peace based on strength as a willingness to wage war and a security doctrine cloaked in the guise of peace.

Peace is a process. In order to achieve stable and sustainable peace, South and North Korea need to work on building peace by adopting an end-of-war declaration as they seek to convert the armistice into a peace treaty or accord while the two sides simultaneously ease tensions, build confidence and engage in arms control.

A path toward denuclearization can be found in that process.

Such actions aren’t a response to “the goodwill of the other side.” Rather, they’re calculated to preclude the kind of unwanted war that can be triggered by mutual distrust and hostility and to lay the groundwork for a stable peace.

During the Cold War, after all, the US and the USSR’s trust in each other’s goodwill enabled them to conclude various treaties that cooled down the arms race. It would certainly seem unfair and even nonsensical to deride such actions as “submissive” and a “false peace.”

But even those peace-building steps are only passive measures for managing an unstable peace. In the end, permanent peace is only made possible by eliminating the structural causes of war.

War means a conflict between countries. If South and North Korea were unified into a single country, the fear of war would naturally disappear. That’s exactly why everyone longs for unification.

But neither unification by military force nor unification through submission to the North Korean regime is an option. Furthermore, it would be too challenging to absorb North Korea following the implosion of its regime.

The most desirable outcome is peaceful unification through an agreement between the two sides, as prescribed in South Korea’s Constitution.

I think that when the overall outline of a Korean Peninsula peace process, denuclearization, comprehensive economic and social exchange, cooperation, and an inter-Korean confederation comes into view, the door will open to lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Let me emphasize once again that robust national security and the willingness to wage war are not enough to guarantee peace. We must be able to make shrewd use of our diplomatic resources to create a new space for denuclearization and peace-building.

History shows that only countries that delicately balanced security through military deterrence and peace through diplomatic negotiations were able to avoid war and sustain peace the longest. That kind of balanced leadership is what I think we need right now.

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