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Geopolitics

Geopolitical Instability Which May Cause Unexpected and Worldwide Nuclear Weapons Accidents

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Kim Jong-un has continued to promote development of ballistic missiles as the main delivery vehicles of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction from 2012. On October 10, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that seven times of launching drills were conducted by the tactical nuclear operation units. Seven times of launching drills means missile launches from September 25 to October 9 [1].

The report referred to Kim Jong-un's remarks: "war deterrent" and "nuclear response posture in unexpected situation at any time". Kim Jong-un also said "we have no content for dialogue with the enemies and felt no necessity to do so". The report showed that North Korea is promoting operations of tactical nuclear weapons targeting South Korea, Japan, and the US based on a long-term plan.

After launching long-range strategic cruise missiles on October 12, North Korea further escalated tensions by flying about 10 military aircrafts to their heavily fortified border and fired a short-range ballistic missile into the sea on October 13 and 14. And on November 2, North Korea launched about 25 missiles and sustained fire about 100 times from various locations into the Sea of the Yellow Sea and others for more than 10 hours. It was the first time that about 25 missiles were launched in one day. After that, the escalated tensions are tightened day by day and not alleviated. On November 4, South Korea's military scrambled fighter jets after detecting about 180 North Korean military aircrafts [2].

North Korea's unprecedentedly frequent missile launches and installation of the tactical nuclear operation units means steady progress from "nuclear development" to "possession of an operational nuclear weapon". It also means North Korea's refusal to engage in dialogue with the US. Korean crisis which seemed to have been eased in recent years still exists in the region as a potential crisis. And the crisis is still related to the three major powers (the US, China and Russia). The Russian Invasion of Ukraine provoked a fierce confrontation between the US and Russia.

On the other hand, the dynamics of militarization of the Asia-Pacific region are accelerating and the conflict between China and the US is sharpening [3]. The US is losing the initiative in East Asia against China. Under the current situation, Kim Jong-un may carry out successive nuclear tests to have diverse tactical nuclear weapons. North Korea's diplomatic card against the US is changing from "denuclearization" to "nuclear disarmament". Changes in North Korea's foreign policies will bring a major impact on geopolitical chaos in East Asia.

Progressive ballistic missile development at extremely fast speed and miniaturization of nuclear weapons

Kim Jong-un has launched far more ballistic missiles and other missiles than any previous North Korean leaders. Kim Jong-il launched 16 missiles from 1994 to 2011. On the other hand, Kim Jong-un has launched more than 130 ballistic missiles from 2012 to present. Also, the number of nuclear tests that Kim Jong-un has already conducted (4 times) is twice as many as that of Kim Jong-il. Following is the number of nuclear tests conducted by nuclear power countries and their development periods to achieve the miniaturization of nuclear weapons and has developed nuclear warheads:

The US: 12 times, six years

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Former Soviet Union: four times, four years

The UK: five times, four years

France: five times, two years

China: three times, two years

North Korea's first nuclear tests were conducted in October 2006. Sixteen years have passed since then and six nuclear tests have already been performed. On 3 September 2017, North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test (H-bomb test) and stated it had tested a thermonuclear weapon (hydrogen bomb) [4]. Estimated power output (TNT) was more than 13 times higher than the fifth nuclear tests. Considering other related mature technologies of the country, there is a high possibility that North Korea had achieved the miniaturization of nuclear weapons and has developed nuclear warheads. Meanwhile, North Korea has significantly improved a wide variety of missile technologies according to the information provided by its own media:

- Launches of multiple missiles at any time and from any point: from 2014
- Improved accuracy for hitting a specific target by launching ballistic missiles from different locations: from May 2019
- Continuous launches of multiple short-range ballistic missiles within 1 minute: from November 2019

The impact of the situation in Ukraine

Tensions and political instability in the East Asia/Asia-Pacific area are also related to the continued escalation in Ukraine [5].

Against the backdrop of NATO and other overwhelmingly dominant forces in the world, the US is enthusiastic about building an "East Asian NATO" as part of the expansion of its territory since the 19th century. And the Trans-Pacific Partnership is expanding US hegemony in the region especially after the Covid-19 crisis although the US is losing the initiative against China.

On June 29, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yun Seok-yeol joined the 2022 NATO Madrid summit for the first time. NATO invited the leaders of the countries, which the organization views as its "Asia-Pacific partner countries". It was also an unprecedented move.

Meanwhile, North Korea aims to possess tactical nuclear weapons with various explosive powers amid the escalation of provocations and counter-provocations in Asia-Pacific region. Pyongyang has said in its own statements that that the current situation in Ukraine is an extension of the past political situations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. In the past international situation, North Korea has repeatedly "learned" that only possession of nuclear weapons effectively protects "enemy" countries from Western intervention [6].

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine of this year provoked a fierce confrontation between the US and Russia. And the conflict between China and the US is sharpening.

For North Korea, this situation is a great chance to force nuclear tests despite strong opposition from the international community including China. With its ethnic nationalism, Kim Jong-un regime's political choices have provoked potential confrontation in the Asia-Pacific region at the expense of working population in the country. Its foreign policy reflects its repressive domestic policy.

The dictatorial regime cannot make other choices. Kim Jong-un may carry out successive nuclear tests, which is like the 1998 tests of nuclear explosive devices conducted by India and Pakistan, to possess diverse tactical nuclear weapons with the support of veto rights of Russia and/or China at the UN Security Council.

The neighboring countries adopting their confrontational policy

This year, North Korea made steady progress from "nuclear development" to "possession of an operational nuclear weapon" by frequent missile launches. And on October 13 and 14, North Korea flew about 10 military aircrafts to their border and fired a ballistic missile into the sea amid its frequent missile launches and installation of the tactical nuclear operation units.

The possibility of North Korea's seventh nuclear tests had also generated a whirlwind of discussions about the redeployment of US tactical weapons on the Korean Peninsula have emerged in South Korea [7]. To prevent the seventh nuclear tests, the US Air Force and ROK Air Force conducted a large-scale joint air training event Vigilant Storm.

Japan is also working to strengthen its defense capabilities to possess "the ability to attack enemy bases". This year, the Ministry of Defense of Japan asked for the largest ever budget \$40.4 billion for fiscal year 2023 [8]. From the standpoint of defense budget, Japan aims to become the third in the world after the US and China. Japan has been strengthening its defense capabilities in remote island areas around Okinawa [9]. And Japan is planning to put an electronic warfare unit on one of the remote islands Yonaguni, which is just 110 km away from Taiwan [10] and is also planning to station anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles and hundreds of troops on Ishigaki island, 270 kilometers from Taiwan.

China, needless to say, continues to build up its military forces. One of the proposed amendments to the constitution following the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) represents an escalation in cross-strait relations. The new amendment states the CCP's commitment to "resolutely oppose and contain Taiwan independence" to promote its "unification of the motherland" [11]. In this way, countries around the Korean Peninsula have stepped up their military response, while their other approaches have disappeared.

Vicious spiral of militarization and nuclear escalation in the region

North Korea has no interest in dialogue with the US for denuclearization and is trying to gain status as a nuclear power country by the next Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea. Meanwhile, diplomatic action of the US will be changed for "nuclear disarmament" according to the current level of tension in which North Korea is about to have diverse tactical nuclear weapons. Nuclear tests would have some impact on the neighboring countries such as China which shares a border with North Korea.

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In a sense, the US and Japan, which are enthusiastic about building an "East Asian NATO", want Kim Jong-un to conduct nuclear tests. If the seventh nuclear tests are pushed ahead, relations between North Korea and China will deteriorate temporarily. As result of the Kim Jong-un's policy, the vicious spiral of militarization and nuclear escalation are about to be fueled in the region. It may raise the ghost of the pro-nuclear consensus which had already prevailed in East Asian countries such as South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan.

Meanwhile some other countries are trying to obtain neutral profits by taking advantage of this situation. Regardless of the energy output the nuclear tests, heightened and intensified regional tensions will endanger geopolitical stability which may trigger unexpected nuclear weapons not only in the Asia-Pacific region but in other parts of the world. Under these circumstances, a global anti-war movement carries a great responsibility especially in the areas/countries facing the danger of the military confrontation such as South Korea, Okinawa [12], and Taiwan.

The population in the areas/countries are victims of former colonial power Japan. It will also symbolize the normalization of diplomatic relations without the recognition of colonial rule, and the contradictions of the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances caused by past colonial rule [13].

5 November 2022

[1] KCNA, 10 October 2022, "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Guides Military Drills of KPA Units for Operation of Tactical Nukes".

[2] Yoonjung Seo, CNN, 4 November 2022, "South Korea scrambles fighter jets after detecting 180 North Korean warplanes, military says".

[3] PIERRE ROUSSET, IVP, 9 SEPTEMBER 2022, "The Taiwan Strait Crisis: Geopolitical Conflicts and the Right of the Taiwanese to Self-Determination".

[4] KCNA, 7 September 2017, "More Rallies Hail Successful H-bomb Test".

[5] KAREN YAMANAKA, IVP, 5 JULY 2022, "Military Alliances Aiming for Another "NATO" in East Asia".

[6] KAREN YAMANAKA, IVP, 17 APRIL 2022, "North Korea's ICBM Strategy under the Current Situation of Ukraine".

[7] Ji Da-gyum, KOREA HERALD, 25 October 2022, "US tactical nuke redeployment, NATO-style nuclear sharing off table, S. Korea says".

[8] Kosuke Takahashi, THE DIPLOMAT, 31 August 2022, "Japanese Defense Ministry Requests Largest Ever Budget for Fiscal Year 2023".

[9] Remote islands around Okinawa are closer to China and Taiwan than to the main island of Japan. And the distance from one of the remote islands Ishigaki Island to Taiwan is only 270 km, which is much closer to the Okinawa Main Island. Taiwan is visible to the naked eye from some of the islands.

[10] LOUISE WATT, Nikkei Asia, 20 August 2021, "Japan missile plan on Ishigaki island helps boost Taiwan defense".

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[11] Mariah Thornton, THE DIPLOMAT, 27 October 2022, "China's 20th Party Congress Escalates Cross-Strait Tensions".

[12] With the Japanese victory in Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), early modern and modern Ryukyu-Okinawa problem faded as they were annexed as part of Japan. But the problem about separation of the Miyako and Yaeyama area from Okinawa has continuously been alleged by population in the area.

[13] KAREN YAMANAKA, IVP, 5 JULY 2022, "Military Alliances Aiming for Another "NATO" in East Asia".

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