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[Column] If you want peace, prepare for peace

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South Korean President Moon Jae-in (right) and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un cross the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) together ahead of the Inter-Korean Summit in Panmunjeom on Apr. 27. (Blue House photo pool)

Seventy years have passed since the Korean War began, and that sad war is still not over. We have yet to find an exit from what is probably the longest-running war in the world. The prospect of peace that arose so miraculously in 2018 turned out to be a mirage following the frustrating developments in the 2019 Hanoi summit.

What does peace mean? Some define it as the absence of war. But a peace earned through an armistice agreement and military deterrence is no more than a “passive peace” that could regress back into war at any time. Structural causes must be eliminated before we can realize an “active peace” that is sustainable in the true sense of the word.

The Roman strategist Vegetius coined the adage, “If you want peace, prepare for war.” But preparing for war with the hope of keeping the peace often leads to a vicious cycle of higher military spending and a heavy-handed foreign policy. Henry Kissinger, a geopolitical realist, made the following argument in his book “A World Restored”: “The

logic of war is power, and power has no inherent limit. The logic of peace is proportion, and proportion implies limitation. The success of war is victory; the success of peace is stability. The conditions of victory are commitment, the condition of stability is self-restraint." Kissinger's insight was that peace is the result not of coercion and submission but of restraint and compromise.

Many people who talk of peace today forget about restraint and compromise. They nonchalantly say we must be willing to sacrifice the small and insecure peace of the present for a greater peace in the future. They disparage efforts to resolve the uncertainty of the present as the defeatist tendency of making humiliating compromises out of a fear of war.

There is even the argument that we should endure a small loss of life today in order to prevent a greater loss of life in the future, suggesting a utilitarian view of war. But how could we achieve a great and sustainable peace in the future without passing through the process of a small and insecure peace? The essence of peace is protecting life both great and small, both now and in the future.

"Peace with a nuclear-armed North Korea would be a peace held hostage to the North's nuclear weapons, a peace whose conditions are determined arbitrarily by the hostage-taker, which is North Korea," wrote Chun Young-woo, director of the Korean Peninsula Future Forum, in a column in the Chosun Ilbo on June 29. Chun said that such a peace would be "degrading" and "servile."

But who is saying we should accept North Korea's nuclear armament? Since Moon Jae-in's inauguration as president, the current administration has steadily pushed for both denuclearization and a peace regime on the assumption that peace on the Korean Peninsula would be impossible without the North's denuclearization.

Even after talks broke down in Hanoi, Seoul has proposed achieving verifiable denuclearization according to the principle of action for action. Under that proposal, the two sides would first build trust, with North Korea completely and permanently shuttering its nuclear and missile facilities at Yongbyon and Tongchang Village and the US taking initial steps toward partial sanctions relief in return. Afterward, they could draft a

comprehensive roadmap through bilateral negotiations and gradually implement that roadmap.

If North Korea's nuclear weapons are a threat to the South, then Pyongyang must be trembling in fear in the face of the overwhelming force of the South Korean and American militaries and the US nuclear arsenal and its extended deterrence. If the Moon administration had been taken hostage and forced to accept a humiliating peace, it wouldn't have needed to increase defense spending by 8% a year, acquire cutting-edge armaments, or cling to its alliance with the US and the strategy of extended deterrence. When it comes to fear, North Korea is certainly not less afraid than we are. Restraint and compromise are impossible as long as we privilege our fear without acknowledging the other side's fear.

Bolton's road to peace is actually a path to war

John Bolton and other hardliners in the US argue that Pyongyang should be forced to choose between its nuclear program and economic development. But until North Korea's security fears are resolved, it will never agree to denuclearize now and be rewarded later. Bolton's way of thinking — badgering Pyongyang with heavy-handed diplomacy and threatening military action if it doesn't cooperate — is not the road to peace, but the road to war. If South Korea accepts such arguments and solely pursues cooperation with the US without improving relations with the North, its diplomats will ultimately be left with no ground to stand on.

The "peace economy" doesn't mean enticing North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons for the promise of prosperity. It's the belief that when economic cooperation has made both sides dependent on each other, their respective security will be assured. The moment that Pyongyang believes such a future is credible, it will be able to give up its nuclear weapons. That's why improving inter-Korean relations despite international restrictions, both big and small, increases our leverage for leading North Korea to denuclearization, which can in turn increase our leverage with the US.

If peace means restraint and compromise, arrogance and self-righteousness are the biggest obstacles to peace. That's why I'm worried by blinkered and binary viewpoints

that ignore the fact that when the other side doesn't have peace, we don't either. If we want peace, we should prepare for peace — because we'll never achieve true peace if we only prepare for war.



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