

Recent changes in the DPRK and Northeast Asia

MIMURA Mitsuhiro

Senior Research Fellow, ERINA

Recent changes in the DPRK have two major aspects. First, the DPRK has focused on developing nuclear weapons and the means for their delivery needed to defend the country from US attack. The DPRK demonstrated its success in manufacturing nuclear warheads through its six nuclear tests. It also conducted many missile tests including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in 2016 and 2017 and showed that it has developed the means for delivery of a nuclear warhead to the mainland United States. In response, the United States abandoned its "strategic patience" policy at the beginning of the Trump administration and began to take a stance of not ruling out a preemptive attack on the DPRK. The ROK came to actively mediate to stop moves that could lead to war. This action led to a move in 2018 with the expectation of the DPRK's debut in the international community, including the DPRK's participation in the Pyeongchang Olympic Games and the US–DPRK summit talks in Singapore.

Second, triggered by the failure of the currency exchange at the end of November 2009, the DPRK has come to set "improvement of people's lives" as an important mission of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) and the state from 2010. It also connived in private economic activities, as well as conducted a number of construction projects for the civilian population mainly in the capital city of Pyongyang. In March 2013, the WPK announced the "byongjin line" to carry out economic development and construction of nuclear weapons at one and the same time, suggesting that by focusing on nuclear weapons it would save funds which would otherwise be put into conventional arms, and directing those funds into the construction of the people's economy. In the same year, a "socialist corporate management responsibility system" was introduced at farms and production enterprises, bringing about major changes in economic management.

These two movements are in fact connected at root. First, improvement in relations between the DPRK and the US/Japan to ensure the safety of the DPRK was supposed to have been carried out in the early 1990s, just after the end of the Cold War. In reality, the DPRK was not able to normalize diplomatic relations with the United States and Japan, whereas the ROK did so with the Soviet Union and China. Moreover, the DPRK had to deal with an era of United States hegemony, as the sole superpower, losing the support of the former Soviet Union and China. That resulted in the acceleration of nuclear and missile development. Second, after the collapse of the Cold War, countries that had been promoting socialist economies in Asia—e.g. China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, etc.—commenced on economic reform and marketization one after another in order to protect their regimes. The DPRK had been left out of this trend, but it seems that since 2013 it has begun to follow this trend.

The current change in Northeast Asia, is, in fact, the beginning of the change that should have occurred at the end of the Cold War, but was left unfinished. In that sense, we Northeast Asians are at the beginning of the process of change toward reaping the fruits of the Post-Cold War era in the true meaning of those words.