

September 19 Comprehensive Military Agreement Should Be Honored

By Yeo Suk-joo

Former Deputy Minister for Defense Policy (2017-2018)

ROK Ministry of National Defense



On September 19, 2018, with Republic of Korea (ROK) President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in attendance, ROK Defense Minister Song Young-moo and Minister of the People's Armed Forces of North Korea Noh Kwang-chol each signed the September 19 Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA). Over the past year since, there have been no reported provocations at the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) on land and the Northern Limit Line (NLL) at sea that were perceived as acts of hostility to both sides. North Korea's recent successive missile launches cannot be regarded as violations of the agreements when assessed in detail. Thus have ended the thousands of military conflicts since the ceasefire that have cut short the lives of many South and North Korean youth and the naval fire that threatened the safety of fishermen in the northwest islands. The persistence of the CMA, in contrast to numerous other past military agreements that have repeatedly been concluded and broken, can be attributed to both sides having been able to implement the agreement without deteriorating their military readiness posture and peacetime operational posture.

Some have assessed the CMA as a "practical end-of-war declaration" while others have dismissed it as a "renouncement of security and a document of surrender." Both views are far stretched from reality. The CMA differs from an end-of-war declaration or a non-aggression pact in that the geographical focus of the agreement centers around the MDL and the NLL. Moreover, equating the CMA with an abandonment of security or a declaration of surrender can largely be seen as political offensives from certain groups whose arguments do not fully derive

from rational considerations. If the CMA was indeed a renouncement of security or a document of surrender, should not the North Korean flag be flying somewhere in South Korea by now, a year since the signing? Should not there have been at least one press conference from the Commander of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command expressing his dissent? Though the CMA does not serve as an actual peace treaty, claims that such agreements have resulted in the weakening of military readiness posture against North Korea and peacetime operational posture are highly inappropriate. Further asserting that the CMA is a renouncement of security or a document of surrender is an act of blasphemy against the ROK Armed Forces that strive to faithfully execute its true purpose.

The CMA can be described as militarily limited, strategically necessary, and historically inevitable. It is militarily limited in the sense that it focuses on ceasing hostilities and preventing clashes in the MDL and the NLL within the framework of the Armistice Agreement and does not affect the maintenance of overall military readiness posture and peacetime operational posture. However, the CMA is strategically necessary since we have established a minimum level of inter-Korean trust to allow for the beginning of North Korean nuclearization and establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Critically, it is historically inevitable that as part of single 5,000-year-old history, Koreans will someday reunite as one. The CMA, through which the two Koreas overcame their Cold War-era ideological differences to make joint promises voluntarily, was part of this inevitability. The Pentagon and the United Nations Command, which monitor compliance of the Armistice Agreement, have supported the CMA precisely because the agreements were made within the framework of the Armistice Agreement and promises were made to stop violating the conditions that have been in place for the past 65 years. The June 30 meeting at the Panmunjom between President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un was made possible because of the CMA's agenda of demilitarization of the Joint Security Area (JSA). As a result, the two leaders were able to walk side by side with both sides' guard forces remaining in place. The CMA also led to the building of minimum trust, from which the two were able to hold the summit meeting with minimal prior preparations. The ongoing Arrowhead Ridge excavation of war remains project is also part of the CMA and is receiving international attention for the potential recovery of the remains of soldiers of American, French and Chinese nationalities.

For more than 70 years, the history of the Korean Peninsula has had its wheels stuck in a ditch of division, spinning repeatedly between confrontation and collision in its attempts to get out. Yet, the wheels did not ultimately cycle back deeper into war because the armistice system,

although wanting, functioned as its break. The CMA is a meaningful product made by the two Koreas of their own accord, and simultaneously serves as firm proof that the two can voluntarily make and keep constructive agreements. The CMA has crucially prevented conflicts in the DML and the NLL throughout the past year and averted bloodshed from the youth of both sides. Furthermore, the mutual maintenance of the agreement will set a strong example and shape the experiences on the path to overcoming division and achieving peace and prosperity.

However, both South and North Korea should carefully attend to the potentially non-binding nature of the CMA. North Korea's recent successive missile launches cannot be regarded as violations of the agreements when assessed in detail, but such actions invite criticism for violating the basic spirit of the CMA, which intends to ease tensions through cessation of hostilities. In addition, it is difficult to deny the possibility of one side's responsive actions resulting in the violation of the CMA's implementation. The July 4th North-South Joint Communiqué (1972) which saw constant violations and readjustment of agreements between South and North Korea should not serve as a precedent in the present situation where there exists deep strategic necessity and historic inevitability. In conclusion, I deeply meditate on intense negotiation process, in which the personnel involved in the agreements strived to carefully phrase each word and effectively negotiate the contents of the CMA, so that the agreement would not end up as a useless piece of paper but could last as a worthy and pursuable promise between both sides. I wish for the CMA to be faithfully honored and come to exemplify its inherent strategic necessity and historical inevitability. I believe that the CMA will provide the necessary thrust to lift the wheels of the history of the Korean Peninsula and its Korean people from the depths of division and push it forward towards paths of reconciliation, peace and prosperity.