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Assessment of the North Korea–Russia Summit and South Korea’s Diplomacy toward Russia

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Since the Korean Peninsula shares borders with Russia, a genuine peace can come only when Russia understands and supports the vision of future for the peninsula that South Korea desires. If Russia makes proposals that can contribute to the reconciliation and shared prosperity of the two Koreas, it will make little sense not to cooperate. There is no need to interpret the latest DPRK–Russia summit as a mere strategic collaboration between the two countries. Russia may play a positive role in inducing North Korea to the international stage. Also, if Russia’s assets within the DPRK expand, it may contribute to facilitating the marketization and diversification of the North Korean economy. Therefore, it is time for Seoul to strengthen its diplomatic capability toward Russia.

The DPRK–Russia Summit in 8 Years: Intention of Pyongyang and Moscow

Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the DPRK, met with President Vladimir Putin of Russia at a summit on April 25 in Vladivostok, the capital city of Primorsky Krai, Russia. The meeting was

held for the first time between the two countries since August 2011, when Kim Jong Il, then-Chairman of the National Defense Commission, met with then-President Dmitry Medvedev in Ulan-Ude, a city in Eastern Siberia, Russia. For years afterwards, Russia had tried to invite Kim Jong Un at every opportunity, but to no avail. The North Korea-Russian ties had naturally remained out of the world spotlight up until now.

Last week, the two leaders finally met with each other thanks to the overlapping strategic interests of Pyongyang and Moscow. After the Hanoi summit with the U.S. ended without an agreement in spite of high expectations, Chairman Kim must have felt a need to review his strategy, a top-down approach that centers on his face-to-face meetings with President Trump. In the meantime, Beijing has not been as supportive toward the North as it was expected to be largely due to its own tumultuous trade negotiations with Washington. In addition, Kim Jong Un does not seem to consider South Korea to be highly reliable in terms of the DPRK-U.S. negotiations. This view was expressed in his blunt remarks toward Seoul saying, “Stop pretending to be a nosy mediator.” As the pressure from international sanctions has been increasingly deteriorating the already slumping economy over time, Kim appears to turn to Russia, on which Pyongyang has not relied much thus far, in search for a new strategic leverage. It was likely that he evaluated potential economic cooperation with Russia as a sound alternative. Moreover, Russia has continuously argued for the relaxation of UN Security Council sanctions imposed on North Korea. Its leader, Putin, does not hesitate to send strongly-worded messages to Washington in contrast to China’s Xi Jinping. All this probably convinced the leader of North Korea that Moscow could be a trusted “partner” that would back him in future negotiations with the U.S.

If so, what is the strategy that Putin had in mind in last week’s meeting with Kim Jong Un? In fact, Russia’s presence was hardly felt when it comes to the issue of Korean Peninsula in recent years. It was not that the two Koreas or other stakeholders surrounding the peninsula intentionally excluded Russia but rather Moscow has not shown strong willingness to engage in issues on the Korean Peninsula. Having annexed Crimea from Ukraine back in 2014, Russia has since been

under economic sanctions imposed by Western countries, a campaign mainly led by the U.S. With its economy heavily dependent on the export of oil and natural gas, sanctions have made the Russian government tighten its belt on the sluggish domestic economy even more, which was already suffering from falling international commodity prices. To make matters worse, Moscow was expelled from the G8 group due to the feud with Western countries. Its relations with the U.S., which hit rock bottom during the Obama administration, have not shown any signs of improvement even after Donald Trump came into office. In fact, anti-Russian sentiment within the U.S. only heightened as Trump, who attempted to approach his Russian counterpart Putin, has become embroiled in a Russia-related scandal. Consequently, this has sent the U.S.-Russian relations into a rapid downward spiral. In addition, it does not help that there are mounting military tensions between Russia and NATO member countries and that Moscow currently faces a plenty of pressing issues concerning the Middle East including Syria. As a result, Russia, until recently, took a back seat on the political situations of Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula, venturing no further than simply making diplomatic rhetoric. Today, as indicated in President Xi's remark that praised the Sino-Russian relations as being at a historical high, Russia, based on a close strategic bond with China, stood one step behind on the issue of the Korean Peninsula, keeping the pace with China.

It would be wrong to say, however, that Russia always sat by and just watched as North Korea's nuclear program has advanced. In 2017, Russia and China developed and proposed to neighbor countries a roadmap to resolve issues on the Korean Peninsula through a comprehensive and gradual approach. After the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics, the inter-Korean and DPRK-U.S. relations have warmed up. Russia finds this lightened mood encouraging, as such developments seem to fit the conditions required for their roadmap implementation. Russia made it clear that it has no intention to join the dialogue on a peace treaty, since it was involved neither in the Korean War nor in the armistice negotiations thereafter. Moscow, however, has stressed multiple times that it will actively engage in the post-denuclearization process, since the issue has direct implications for Russia's own national security due to its geographical proximity to the DPRK. In the

Russia–China roadmap, the final step is the institutionalization of a multilateral security cooperation regime in Northeast Asia, which includes Russia.

Did Putin and Kim meet their respective goals through the summit? The two leaders, both of whom are under U.S.–led sanctions, probably would have found themselves in a similar position due to the pains felt from sanctions. For Russia, the summit could have been satisfactory, seen as a chance to embolden its presence on the Korean Peninsula to some extent, which had been relatively weaker than that of the U.S. and China. As for North Korea, now it may see its bargaining power reinforced from Russia’s emergence as a new backer in negotiations with America. It remains to be seen, however, whether Pyongyang received gifts that it had wanted, such as lifting of sanctions, economic cooperation, and assistance. The author finds it quite unlikely.

During the summit, Kim reminded Putin of the blood alliance of the past between the DPRK and USSR and expressed his willingness to restore the old ties, asking the Russian leader to become a supporter of his regime along with China in his negotiations with the U.S. In a press conference after the summit, Putin emphasized the need to guarantee the Kim regime’s security saying that the six–party talks will need to be resumed where the international laws govern the security guarantee of North Korea. The six–party talks, set up in 2002 to address the 2nd North Korean nuclear crisis, came to a halt in December 2008, as tensions rose between Pyongyang and Washington over the verification of denuclearization. Beijing and Moscow are still inclined to resume the talks. It is notable that Kim Jong Un said in his 2019 New Year’s speech that “we must actively push for a multilateral negotiation to transform the current armistice regime on the Korean Peninsula into a peace regime so that we can effectively lay a foundation for the guarantee of a permanent peace.” The remarks implied a possibility to form a united front with China and Russia in case bilateral talks with the U.S. go sour.

The international spotlight was cast on President Putin’s call for the guarantee of the North Korean regime’s security and the six–party talks as a means to resolve this issue. Some are worried that Russian intervention may pose an obstacle to the top–down dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea. Such concerns

were reinforced after media outlets reported that the Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, Nikolai Patrushev, who happened to be visiting the Blue House on April 25, delivered to President Moon Jae-in of South Korea the Russian government's stance on the need for the six-party talks.

At the moment, the ROK government is discreet about resuming the six-party talks and remains committed to the bilateral top-down approach shown between the U.S. and DPRK. Multilateral dialogues, as proven in the past, tend to consume much energy and time only to produce less-than-anticipated results. In addition, the Moon administration believes that Trump and Kim stand a good chance of eventually making a deal, given that the two leaders are optimistic about the prospect of a third summit. Washington, too, is skeptical about Moscow's proposal. The U.S. experts assess that Russia, which has not played any significant role to date, is making things complicated in an attempt to assume a role in negotiations. Being the parties to the negotiations, North Korea, the U.S. and South Korea will agonize over how to break through the current stalemate for the time being. China and Russia, on the other hand, may start an active discussion to resume the six-party talks. For all parties involved, there will be an intense search for a breakthrough behind the scenes.

With Obscure Outcomes Expected from Economic Cooperation between the DPRK and Russia. But Russia...?

Interestingly, after the Vladivostok summit the leaders of the DPRK and Russia did not seem to elaborate on bilateral economic cooperation, although the topic was likely to be discussed at the summit. There is little doubt that North Korea desperately needs Russia's support since its economy has suffered a severe economic blow caused by sanctions. Also, it can be assumed that economic cooperation was high on the meeting agenda given the line-up of Russian officials who attended the summit. The author, however, is rather skeptical of the impact of North Korea-Russia economic cooperation since the DPRK-Russia economic cooperation projects of the past ended up producing little. It is widely known that

Russia accounts for merely 1% of all cross-border trade of the DPRK while China's share is close to 90%. It is practically impossible for Pyongyang to replace China with Russia economically. Moreover, during the USSR's heyday, the economic relations between the two communist countries all but consisted of unilateral loan and aid from Moscow. It is highly likely that Pyongyang wants to resume the same one-way support from Moscow in the name of economic cooperation. In 2014 Russia generously wrote off 90% of its loans to the North as a measure of vitalizing cooperation with the DPRK only to have a minimal effect.

Today's economically struggling Russia has relatively little to offer to North Korea. Moscow is striving to attract foreign investment to the development of the Far East region from other Asia-Pacific countries such as South Korea and Japan—its top policy priorities. With scarce infrastructure and population on a rapid decline, however, the Far East region is hardly a favorable choice for many of the investors. Obviously, China has sufficient workforce and finance to develop the Far East region. Yet, Russia does not want the region to be dominated by China. That is where South Korea and Japan can come in for the investment and cooperation. In the same vein, instead of seeking direct benefits from economic ties with Pyongyang, Moscow might be after economic gains from trilateral cooperation with the two Koreas as well as political gains from its newly earned reputation as a mediator for peace on the Korean Peninsula. That is why Russia has shown interest in pursuing economic cooperation, railroad restoration, and the overhaul of transportation networks with North Korea. The success of that plan depends on whether Russia will be able to meet North Korea's expectation on cooperation and support and whether North Korea will in turn guarantee Russia's interests that it wants. The prospects are hardly rosy, however. Above all, Russia will never go back to its old self, the generous USSR, in its future relations with North Korea.

In terms of relief or complete lifting of sanctions, a goal that Pyongyang is so keen to achieve, Russia is unlikely to blatantly violate UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions to take North Korea's side. Moscow cannot unilaterally support the North when it urgently needs to improve relations with the U.S. and keep in step with China. It is also implausible that the Russian government officially

acknowledges the DPRK as a nuclear-armed state.

Despite many limitations, however, it would be a mistake to brush off Russia as it emerges as the Kim regime's new rescue pitcher. The country is a permanent member of the UNSC, capable of exercising its veto power on North Korea-related agenda. Also, Russia's understanding of the current situation and strategy should not be neglected considering its not-so-insignificant influence on North Korea's attitude and the future progress of DPRK-U.S. negotiations. While it has relatively little leverage compared to China, Russia still can help the Kim regime endure the sanctions, such as offering humanitarian assistance. For instance, in March 2016, Russia provided the DPRK with wheat flour valued roughly at USD 4 million. More recently, it has contributed USD 8 million to North Korea under the World Food Programme's support project from 2018 to 2019. Also, the Russian government is reportedly reviewing the North Korean authority's request for granting 50,000 tons of wheat for the recovery of the damage caused by last year's natural disaster. Moreover, Moscow last year provided 29,240 tons of refined oil to the DPRK, some 10,000 tons more than Beijing's provision, 19,188 tons. A recently published UN report revealed that Russia in 2019 granted some 9,000 more tons of refined oil to North Korea than China did as of February. Since the official statistics cover only refined oil, Washington believes that the total amount of oil given to the North must be much greater in volume. According to some experts, there might be informal military trade between Russia and North Korea that had been kept out of the official statistics.

Korea's Diplomatic Capability on Russia Needs to Be Enhanced

Although Russia's supporting role might fall short of Kim Jong Un's expectation, it will continue its cooperation with the DPRK, since it can take advantage of their ties to induce South Korea's participation for the development of Far East region and enhance its negotiating power in addressing North Korea's denuclearization issues. Moscow is aware that there is only a slim chance that trilateral cooperation with the two Koreas, its top priority on the issue of the Korean

Peninsula, begins in the near future. Therefore, it will strategically focus on improving its political and economic relations with Pyongyang, seeing it as the only way to strengthen its presence regarding the issues on the Korean Peninsula. In addition, the trilateral cooperation is likely to be back on the table and even materialized, once the inter-Korean and DPRK-U.S. relations lighten up beyond a certain degree. In fact, the Moon administration inadvertently increased Russia's clout on the peninsular issues. Some of its visions, the New Economic Map Initiative for the Korean Peninsula and the East Asian Railroad Community all presumed the trilateral cooperation as a precondition. After all, resolving North Korea's nuclear issues and forging peace and prosperity on the peninsula would be extremely challenging without Russia's cooperation. Moscow seems to be fully aware that Seoul is bound to seek cooperation with Russia because of its strategic needs.

How the ROK should respond to Russia's strategy? The answer might be simple in words, but tough in deeds: Seoul should exert its utmost efforts, both diplomatically and economically, to ensure that Russia act as a constructive collaborator. Russia shares borders with the Korean Peninsula. It is a country that is sensitive to border security issues, arguably more than any other country in the world. Indeed, tensions are brewing up between Russia and two of its neighbors, Ukraine and Georgia. Therefore, a genuine peace can come only when Russia understands and supports the vision of future for the peninsula that South Korea desires. If Russia makes proposals that can contribute to the reconciliation and shared prosperity of the two Koreas, it will make little sense not to cooperate. There is no need to interpret the latest DPRK-Russia summit as a mere strategic collaboration between the two countries. Russia may play a positive role in inducing North Korea to the international stage. Also, if Russia's assets within the DPRK expand, it may contribute to facilitating the marketization and diversification of the North Korean economy. Therefore, it is time for Seoul to strengthen its diplomatic capability toward Russia.

The ROK's strategic cooperation with Russia needs to be elevated. It will be ideal if the mutual trust between South Korea and Russia is constantly consolidated at various levels from the summit to the government and public, while Russia plays

a positive role in bringing peace and prosperity to the peninsula. To this end, Seoul needs to actively find the common ground among Russia's solution on the peninsular issue, the ROK-U.S. proposal, and that of North Korea. After all, there are more passengers than the two Koreas and the U.S. riding a vehicle called the Korean Peninsula. For now, Seoul should focus on finding out Pyeongyang's intention through an inter-Korean summit as early as possible and restoring the momentum for the 3rd DPRK-U.S. summit. It will be desirable to take advantage of summit diplomacy of surrounding countries. Trump's visit to Japan scheduled for this May or June, the upcoming G20 summit, and Putin's possible visit to South Korea that the Korean government is currently arranging are all chances that Seoul might want to utilize actively. ©KINU 2019

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