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# DPRK–China Summit and DPRK–U.S. Correspondence Diplomacy: Assessment and Prospects in the Future

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After four months of stalemate, North Korea–U.S. dialogue has been finally revitalized thanks to Chinese President Xi Jinping’ s state visit to the DPRK, a meeting with Kim Jung Un, and subsequent letter sent by Trump to Kim. This paper assesses the Xi–Kim summit and the latest correspondence diplomacy between America and North Korea and forecasts how political situation will evolve on the Korean Peninsula. The purpose of Xi’ s Pyongyang visit was most likely to enhance China’ s strategic standing in the international arena and respond to the strategic demands of neighbor countries. The chances are that Beijing sought to create a message and an opportunity that would satisfy the interests and demands of the two Koreas, U.S., and China. The Chinese President coming to the country was a good chance to change the situation for the DPRK. In fact, Xi’ s visit provided support to Kim’ s decisions and a rationalization to resume U.S.–DPRK dialogue. As for the ROK, the Xi–Kim summit should be seen a positive event that spurs the dialogue’ s revival. If such a resumption needs multilateral cooperation and multi–dimensional mediation, Seoul should not hesitate to take advantage of China’ s role. In other words, South Korea needs to be cautious about judging Xi’ s trip to the DPRK as a move to interfere with or hamper bilateral dialogue. Through the latest Xi–Kim summit, China probably intended to retain its influence over the DPRK in a bid to maintain the Sino–American balance of power and offer a promise of cooperation to the U.S. rather than to pressure the country. Notably, during his brief presence in Pyongyang, the Chinese President expressed his support for a political resolution through dialogue rather than a support for Chairman Kim. There is a good chance that working–level negotiations will start again in July after the upcoming G20 and South Korea–U.S. summits. After the disagreement in Hanoi, both sides have admitted the need for a mutually flexible approach. If they build a consensus on the importance of flexibility, the 3<sup>rd</sup> North Korea–U.S. summit and agreements of a certain degree may be realized faster than expected.

On 20-21 June, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited North Korea and held a summit with Kim Jung Un, Chairman of the National Defense Commission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Throughout the visit, China's leader continuously stressed "dialogue," "political resolution," and "peace and stability." North Korea's leader responded that he would engage in a dialogue with patience. After the summit, Pyeongyang openly announced that Chairman Kim had received a letter from U.S. President Trump, saying it contained "interesting content." Chairman Kim praised the U.S. President for his "great political determination and extraordinary courage." To deliver this message abroad, Pyeongyang mobilized the Korean Central News Agency, Korean Central Television, and the first page of the Rodong Sinmun, which appears to be Kim's way of declaring the resumption of talks. Such a signal of Chairman Kim, to be passed on via two bilateral summits (U.S.-China and ROK-China) on the sidelines of the upcoming G20 summit, is likely to be transformed into creating a harmonious atmosphere at the ROK-U.S. summit on June 30. There is a good chance that the fog of uncertainty hanging over the future of peace process on the Korean Peninsula since the North Korea-U.S. summit in Hanoi may finally be lifted. This paper provides an assessment of Xi's visit to the DPRK and the DPRK-China summit as well as the recent "correspondence diplomacy" between Washington and Pyeongyang. It also forecasts how the situation on the Korean Peninsula will evolve in the future.

### **Background of Xi's Visit to the DPRK**

Officially, the Chinese President visited the DPRK primarily to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. On January 7, 2019, Chairman Kim expressed his wish to invite Xi to Pyeongyang during the 4<sup>th</sup> DPRK-China summit in Beijing. Reportedly, the Chinese government earlier this year planned a trip of successive summits to Japan, South Korea, and North Korea around June. Anticipating that the Hanoi summit would reach a certain level of agreement, Beijing probably considered, to keep an optimistic mood alive, bringing a gift of friendship to the DPRK that would match the weight of Xi's

first-ever state visit to the country and celebration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of forming the diplomatic ties between North Korea and China. However, the disappointing outcomes of the Hanoi summit and escalating trade war with the U.S. probably made China contemplate whether its leader should visit Pyongyang and if so, when.

Some believe that the 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protests affected the Chinese President's decision to visit the DPRK in June. According to this view, he went to Pyongyang to divert the international community's attention from Hong Kong or secure a "North Korean card" in case the U.S. raises this issue at the G20 summit in June. However, it is unlikely that the anti-government marches in Hong Kong were the sole reason behind Xi's visit to Pyongyang. In fact, a simple look at the timeline of the unfolding protests might be enough to interpret that Xi's visit was most likely to be decided independent of the unrest in Hong Kong. Anti-government protesters began to take to the streets of Hong Kong on June 4, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. June 9, 16, and 22 also saw massive demonstrations on the streets. Given this timeline, it would practically be impossible for the two countries to prepare for a state visit that commemorated the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of official diplomatic relations. It is because preparations had to include President Xi's op-ed for the *Rodong Sinmun* (published on June 19) and organizing extravagant welcoming events, large-scale performances, and security and protocol plans in the short-span of 3 to 9 days. It is also hardly convincing that Beijing believed a one-time visit to Pyongyang would be enough to let it get away with the unrest in Hong Kong, intensified by Xi's visit to the DPRK, and to avert the subsequent international attention and the criticism from the U.S.

### **Xi's Purpose of the Visit (1): Enhancing China's Strategic Standing and Considering the Demands of Neighboring Countries**

A more convincing explanation of Xi Jinping's visit to the DPRK might be that it was China's attempt to enhance its strategic standing on the global stage and respond to the demands of neighboring countries. Once the President's travel to North Korea was decided, Beijing must have contemplated the best timing and

what message would most satisfy the interests and demands of South Korea, North Korea, the U.S. as well as its own. For Pyongyang, Xi's appearance in North Korea was a good chance to break the current stalemate. It has been trying to overcome the unexpected blow caused by the Hanoi summit and to secure some ground to resume negotiations with the U.S. To do so, the Kim regime needs Washington's message of change before anything. In reality, however, chances are slim that the U.S. would send such a message first, and in public. Holding an inter-Korean summit at this moment would have little immediate and practical advantage for Pyongyang. Having demanded the U.S. to give an answer by the end of the year, a meeting with Moon Jae-in may risk Kim to expose his leverage prematurely. In doing so, he may be pressured to give an answer on denuclearization with little compensation.

By contrast, Xi's trip to Pyongyang was beneficial to North Korea because it gave additional momentum to Kim's recent decisions as well as provided some ground to resume dialogue with the U.S. In fact, the disappointing Hanoi summit damaged Kim's authority and reputation in that Kim traveled for 66 long hours on a train to the capital of Vietnam only to gain no outcome. Perhaps, that experience may have amplified his fatigue and skepticism about denuclearization, a path that he took against various internal concerns. Hanoi's no agreement may also have reduced a room to maneuver in North Korea's U.S. strategy. As uncertainty continues to grow, he may feel increasingly tempted to return to the old, hardline approach. Against this backdrop, the Chinese leader's visit to Pyongyang was a chance to show off Xi's support for Kim and the strong friendship between the two countries, thereby bringing a sense of stability within North Korea. Xi's gifts, economic support and cooperation, may also sooth bureaucrats who have been under the pressure of international sanctions. Those possible impacts are in line with China's interest. It does not want to see Kim's authority shaken who has chosen a path of denuclearization, reform, and openness.

South Korea, too, might find Xi's trip advantageous. There are a number of factors that may prolong the current U.S. and DPRK stalemate. Washington and Pyongyang have been struggling to regain the momentum for four months since Hanoi. Then, there is North Korea's unpredictable nature, prone to provocations as

demonstrated in the May launch of short-range missiles, anxieties caused by the dialogue's derailed status and the end-of-the year deadline imposed by the Kim regime, and the upcoming U.S. presidential race, which may weaken Washington's focus on Pyongyang. All of this would probably have made Seoul restless, which is perhaps why South Korea suggested an inter-Korean summit at an early date before the ROK-U.S. summit. Such a proposal could perhaps be best interpreted as South Korea's desperate attempt to obtain North Korea's affirmation, the key to break the stalemate, before the Moon-Trump meeting. If Xi's visit to Pyongyang brought an excuse to resume talks and internal stability to the DPRK, there is no reason for the ROK not to welcome it. Therefore, understanding the Xi-Kim meeting as a crisis for South Korea or its role being lessened might be a very lopsided view. The Moon administration has a clear goal: it wants to proceed with U.S.-DPRK negotiations as well as the denuclearization and peace process on the peninsula. If multilateral cooperation and multi-dimensional mediation are deemed necessary, South Korea has good reasons to take advantage of China's role.

### **Xi's Purpose of the Visit (2): Maintaining Its Influence on the DPRK and Securing Leverage over the U.S.**

Some may argue that Xi visited Pyongyang to make an intervention, create a four-party structure or hamper the U.S. in already stalled talks with the DPRK or pressure the U.S. in the ongoing trade war. Such a view risks being superficial. Beijing announced in mid-May that it would go its "own way" in the face of trade conflicts against Washington. This statement, however, may not be what it sounds: it is plausible that the Chinese government planned an exit strategy to protect the dignity and reputation of Xi as well as the pride of the Chinese people while withdrawing from a hard-to-win war. China probably finds it unnecessary to engage in a prolonged trade war with Trump, who is expected by many to win a second term. From this perspective, Xi's trip to the DPRK is not necessarily an attempt to pressure the U.S. It makes more sense to understand the visit as an opportunity to maintain its influence over the DPRK in consideration of a Sino-American power

balance and to offer promises of cooperation to the U.S. that gives Beijing a positive leverage over Washington.

China consistently emphasized “dialogue,” “political resolution,” and “peace and stability” throughout the June DPRK-China summit. In the summit, Xi stated that he “looks forward to seeing outcomes from DPRK-U.S. talks” and “supports a political resolution for Korean Peninsula issues.” The entire progress of the summit was shared in real time with the press, possibly an effort to minimize any misunderstanding by the U.S. On the surface, during his time in Pyongyang, Xi focused on offering promises of support to America, providing a sense of stability for DPRK-U.S. dialogue and endorsing Kim Jung Un’s decisions. However, he also expressed a willingness to maintain China’s clout over the DPRK, saying the country would play “an active role” in resolving Korean Peninsula issues and “help as much as possible” in North Korea’s security and development. The latest Xi-Kim summit was an opportunity for China to demonstrate its strategic position and presence while retaining its influence over the DPRK and showing a conciliatory tone toward the U.S. against the backdrop of Sino-American strategic rivalry.

From North Korea’s view, the current negotiation structure against the U.S. is hardly advantageous in that it was built within the trilateral relations among the U.S., South Korea and North Korea, with coordination between the ROK and U.S. as the pillar of the structure. It is plausible that the Hanoi summit may have made Pyongyang convinced that persuading Washington via Seoul has certain limits under the ROK-U.S. alliance. Kim Jung Un’s recent summits with Putin and Xi, respectively, may represent a bid to strike a balance in this unfavorable game by introducing new mediators. The denuclearization talks, in principle, are supposed to be concluded between Washington and Pyongyang alone. Nevertheless, it would be irrational to consider China and Russia’s entrance in negotiation structure as a purely negative factor if their support for the DPRK in the negotiation process will help strike a balance that is needed for a political resolution. The two countries have the potential to play the role of North Korea’s safety pad, the minimum guarantee that will ensure the Kim regime’s active engagement in negotiations and help stabilize Kim Jung Un’s leadership. If so, South Korea will want to find ways to tap into that potential. There

is also a need to utilize China and Russia in flexibly adjusting the demands of the DPRK and U.S. After all, the Moon administration already declared multilateral cooperation under the basic framework of U.S.-DPRK negotiations as its official strategic approach in the pursuit of denuclearization and a peace regime on the peninsula.

### **Xi's Message: Focus on Dialogue-led Political Resolution than Support**

There were a few highlights in Xi's state visit to the DPRK and the North Korea-China summit. First, the Chinese President stressed "dialogue," "political resolution," and "regional peace and stability" from the beginning to the end of the visit. The author counted Xi's most frequently used words in his op-ed on the Rodong Sinmun and remarks made at the summit, luncheon, and welcome dinner as reported by China's state media outlets that included CCTV and the Xinhua News Agency. It turned out that "regional peace and stability" was used as many as 12 times, followed by "political resolution," seven times, and "dialogue" and "strategic communication and coordination," five times each. In approaching Korean Peninsula issues from the perspective of regional peace and stability, the analysis indicates that China prioritized a political resolution via dialogue and urged the DPRK to engage in mutual strategic communication and coordination between North Korea and China.

By contrast, covering the state visit, the Rodong Sinmun and Korean Central News Agency mentioned "friendship between the DPRK and China (its immutability and invincibility)" and "shared a view of the two countries" three times each. They were followed by "communication between the DPRK and China" and "peace and stability," used two times each. Pyeongyang emphasized the traditional friendship and shared opinions on pressing issues between the two countries. In sum, China focused on stressing U.S.-DPRK dialogue, negotiations, and political resolutions. Meanwhile, North Korea focused on the closeness of ties as indicated in their mentioning of friendship and communication.

The degree of his support to the DPRK's position is noteworthy when analyzing media coverage of Xi's remarks. He appeared to maintain a highly cautious

or passive tone in expressing support for the neighboring country. In the Rodong Sinmun article published on June 19, the Chinese President wrote that he “supports resolving North Korea’s reasonable matters of interest through dialogue.” These were his most direct words of support during the entire visit. Even this phrase, however, focuses on supporting the resolution of North Korea’s matters of interest through talks rather than supporting the North’s position. Other than that, the 66-year-old Chinese leader did not go further than “building consensus on critical issues” or “reaching a shared recognition.”

This analysis indicates that China took a highly cautious stance. It chose to support the idea that North Korea’s reasonable requests should be addressed through dialogue, instead of directly supporting North Korea. Beijing was probably wary of the Xi-Kim summit being interpreted as favoring the DPRK, and wanted to give the impression that it was focused on facilitating the resumption of U.S.-DPRK talks. Also noteworthy is that neither Beijing nor Pyeongyang condemned the U.S. in media coverage.

### **Encouraging North Korean-style Reform and Opening in Support of the Policy of Concentrating All Efforts on Economic Development**

China also expressed support for North Korea’s new strategic approach and its full concentration on developing the economy and improving the livelihood of ordinary people. This position has many implications. First, China emphasized its unwavering support for denuclearization and “concentrating all efforts on economic development,” North Korea’s new policy decided at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenary Meeting of the 7<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Workers’ Party last year. Second, to help the DPRK to maintain the approach, China showed its willingness to bolster humanitarian aid and to facilitate exchanges and cooperation to share its experience in state governance, economic development, and improvement of people’s lives. This suggestion appears to be an effort to prevent Pyeongyang’s policy modification or regression. If coupled with denuclearization and improved U.S.-DPRK relations, the policy of “concentrating all efforts on economic development,” decided at the 3<sup>rd</sup>



Plenary Meeting of the 7<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Workers' Party, can be considered a de facto Pyeongyang-style declaration of reform and opening.

### **Support and Cooperation in DPRK's Fields of Interest under Sanctions Regime**

China suggested bolstering strategic communication and expanding economic exchange and cooperation at the summit. In the op-ed published in the Rodong Sinmun on June 19, Xi proposed promoting visits by high-level officials, party-level exchanges, friendly exchanges in the private sector, and cooperation in education, culture, sports, tourism, youth, regional development, and improvement of ordinary people's lives. Through a Rodong Sinmun article on June 21, the DPRK government announced that the two leaders during the Xi-Kim summit agreed to engage in closer strategic communication while maintaining the tradition of high-level visits and promoting coordination and exchange in many areas. According to a CCTV report, Kim expressed his wish to learn from China's experience in economic development and the improvement of people's lives.

It is noteworthy which areas Xi named in his proposal as a subject for exchange and cooperation. Most are in line with the same policy areas that Pyeongyang has focused on since the young Kim's rise to power. Kim has stressed light industry, tourism, city, people's livelihood, forest, and economic cooperation with China through field guidance since last year. The areas of cooperation that the Chinese President mentioned include people's livelihood, tourism, and regional development, areas that are either not subject to the sanctions or relatively less risky. This indicates that Beijing tried to carefully select areas of cooperation that are in Kim's best interest and do not infringe on the sanctions at the same time. China also appeared to be determined to materialize its suggestions as implied by the attendance of He Lifeng, Director of the National Development and Reform Commission, and Zhong Shan, Minister of Commerce and other key officials at the June summit.

Last is a possibility of military cooperation. Among the summit's attendees were Miao Hua, Director of the Political Work Department of the Central Military

Commission of China and Kim Su-gil, Director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army. China's Political Work Department and North Korea's Political Work Department both oversee political control over the military and implementation of military policy inside the armed forces. The two departments can be regarded as counterparts for military policy exchanges. Thus, it is likely that the two sides discussed observation of military exercises as well as exchanges and cooperation in military modernization. From a broader perspective, it is also plausible that the two countries may have discussed methods to gradually strengthen military bonds that could address Pyongyang's security concerns over denuclearization.

### **What Will Come After DPRK-China Summit & DPRK-U.S. Correspondence Diplomacy**

Shortly after the Xi-Kim summit, North Korea revealed that Chairman Kim had received a letter from President Trump. The Rodong Sinmun published a front page picture of Kim reading the letter. The Korean Central News Agency and Korean Central Television, the regime's main media outlets for the outside world, were also mobilized to publicize the news. Such an unusual manner of disclosing a letter's arrival implies that the Kim regime has something to say. The letter was likely to be delivered to the supreme leader of the DPRK before or, at the latest, during his summit with Xi. Looking back, a series of events took place in June. A spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Korea had a discourse to celebrate the first anniversary of North Korea-China summit held on June 12, 2018. That was followed by a relevant op-ed in the Rodong Sinmun on June 12, the publication of seals to commemorate the June 12 summit, the visit of Xi Jinping to North Korea and last, the revelation of the letter sent by Trump. All these events are probably a set of actions in one package that signals North Korea's declaration that it wants dialogue to be resumed. If so, the Kim regime took advantage of Xi's visit to Pyongyang as an opportunity and rationalization to rekindle talks with the U.S.

Xi will probably deliver a message to Trump at the upcoming G20 summit on the DPRK's willingness to resume dialogue and Kim's position on the issue. After the Hanoi summit ended in disagreement, Kim proposed that the two sides "search

for a constructive solution putting down one-sided demands” during a speech at the Supreme People’s Assembly. Afterwards, this phrase has been repeatedly used in almost all North Korean media reports or official discourses that cover the issue. Given that, it is plausible that Xi may deliver Kim’s message to Trump that contains indications of how flexible Pyeongyang can be. Stephen Biegun, the U.S. Special Representative for North Korea, said on June 19 in a keynote speech delivered in an event organized by the Atlantic Council that there is no precondition for the revival of dialogue with North Korea and that both sides need a flexible approach. Hanoi’s failed agreement appears to have had the two countries reach a consensus on the need for flexibility.

Now that Kim Jung Un indicated his positions, the leaders of South Korea and the U.S. are likely to welcome the proposal by resuming dialogue on the occasion of the South Korea-U.S. summit on June 30. There is a good chance that working-level negotiations will start again in July. The revived talks may differ from old ones. Hanoi made both sides realize the existence of some gap between the two. Now, they might have a clearer idea about what they should concede. Therefore, working-level officials may focus on narrowing specific gaps. As for Trump, he may be less inclined to reach a complete and perfect political agreement. Rather, he might attempt to wrap up dialogue when he secures a political confirmation from North Korea to a certain level of comprehensiveness of the deal and the materialization of first-phase measures. What is fundamental is to strike a balance; if North Korea agrees on comprehensive denuclearization, the U.S. should also agree to guarantee the comprehensive security of the regime. To that end, North Korea needs to accept a comprehensive degree of denuclearization and related roadmap beyond Yongbyon. If such flexible attitudes are shared, the 3<sup>rd</sup> North Korea-U.S. summit and certain agreements may come faster than expected. To make it possible, the ROK, DPRK and U.S. need to carefully coordinate their messages to the outside world until working-level talks finally resume. ©KINU 2019

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