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Analysis of the Second Session of the 14th SPA of the DPRK and Prospects on Foreign Policy

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The second session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) of North Korea is highly related to efforts to reorganize the state management system and Chairman Kim's diplomatic movement in the future after no deal was reached between North Korea and the U.S. in Hanoi. In North Korea, internal censorship was ramped up along the South-North line led by Kim Yong-chol and the group involved in preparing the Hanoi summit. Against this backdrop, Chairman Kim had the amendment passed aimed at bolstering the status of the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission at this session, a task that has been deferred thus far. In other words, North Korea responded again after last April to "direct and indirect pressure on Kim Jong Un's policy direction" raised internally after a no-deal summit in Hanoi last February. It seemed that North Korea needed to reorganize the state management system to brace for a full-blown diplomatic battle in the external front in addition to internal preparations. It should be noted that Chairman Kim released a message for President Trump through his speech on administrative policies last April, setting the timing of the negotiation "by the end of the year." What should be noted after this SPA session is how Chairman Kim's diplomatic battle will unfold after he named the deadline "the end of this year." Chairman Kim appeared to prepare for diplomatic battles to go beyond a strategy of utilizing superpowers' conflicts. North Korea already declared itself a de-facto nuclear state at the end of 2017. The DPRK, through diplomacy, now attempts to engage in international conflict structure going beyond Northeast Asia, thereby strengthening Chairman Kim's status and elevating its strategic values.

The second session of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was held on 29 August, 2019. This session was held with the goal of reorganizing the state management system triggered by the need to review its internal systems for the second time after the Hanoi summit and to design a diplomatic move led by Chairman Kim Jong Un for the second half of this year. In terms of the formal aspects involved, the second session took place just four months after the first session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (April, 2019), which proclaimed a strategic line of "self-reliance and military reinforcement" after no deal was reached with the U.S. in Hanoi. To that end, it is necessary to look into features of both the formality and contents of the second session of the 14th SPA in analyzing the intentions of the North and make a projection for the future.

Exceptional Hosting of the SPA in August without Kim Jong Un

Some formal characteristics of the second session of the 14th SPA are that it was held during an unlikely period, in August, and without the presence of Kim Jong Un, contrary to the traditional practice of hosting such sessions around September or October. Further, there may be two possible reasons behind Chairman Kim's absence. First, it may not look desirable in terms of appearance if Chairman Kim does attend when the agenda for this session is to strengthen his status and authority as the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission. In other words, to secure legitimacy for reinforcing the Kim regime in his favor, it is better if he bolsters his power based on the procedural legitimacy and the subsequent "recommendations of the public" rather than by the will of the leader himself. The second reason may be that constitutional reform was made in this session stipulating the "Chairman of the State Affairs Commission will not be elected as Deputy of the SPA." He might not attend in SPA session this time since Chairman Kim Jong Un is currently not a member of the SPA Deputies.

Another feature to consider is timing. North Korea's SPA, tantamount to the regular session of South Korea's National Assembly, takes place one or two times

a year, usually in April in the first half of the year, and in September or October in the second half of the year. However, this time the SPA was held only four months after the first session of the 14th SPA. North Korea's Constitution was amended again in four months, not long after the North Korean authority revealed a reformed Constitution last April. Considering the timing and history of the hosting of the SPA, the exceptional holding of the SPA in August is highly related to Chairman Kim's possible diplomatic movement into the second half of this year. Regarding his diplomatic move, it should be noted that Chairman Kim released a message for President Trump through his speech on administrative policies last April, setting the timing of the negotiation "by the end of the year." In the speech, Chairman Kim said "I will wait and watch patiently for a decision by the U.S. by the end of this year." Against this backdrop, this SPA session was held much earlier than usual in the midst of designing North Korea's policy strategy for the second half of this year.

Linkage with Adjustment of Internal and External Policies

Chairman Kim, who re-designed North Korea's policy after the Hanoi summit on February 2019, showed his willingness to utilize both "dialogue and confrontation" as a way to induce President Trump to the negotiation table in his speech last April. He also said that the dialogues for resuming negotiations should be done in their favor. In other words, he believed that recently, the U.S. has attempted to resume dialogue, but issues will not be resolved through the American way of talks, which "unilaterally imposes its own demands." He went on to say that if Washington comes forward with a "new way of calculation," he will engage in negotiations with a top-down approach building on the still cozy relationship between him and President Trump.

Chairman Kim also burned his bridges so that he could never turn back by hinting at the possibility of a provocation after the set timing has expired. In terms of timing, he set a deadline for negotiations and dialogues, the end of this year. In terms of the possibility of provocation, he stated "I expect that the U.S. would

make a wise choice in this make-or-break moment and that the clocks of deep-seated DPRK-U.S. confrontation that barely ground to a halt will not have to be run again.” That was his rationale for the self-justification that if the U.S. does not accept the negotiation proposal of ‘North Korean style,’ he has no choice but to revert to the confrontational phase. The decision made at the second session of the 14th SPA is in line with Chairman Kim’s message toward both at home and abroad announced in his speech last April.

A diplomatic battle in Northeast Asia is in full-swing, in which complex national interests are at play in conflict with each other. In North Korea, internal censorship was ramped up along the South-North line led by Kim Yong-chol and the group involved in preparing the Hanoi summit. Against this backdrop, Chairman Kim had the amendment passed aimed at bolstering the status of the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission at this session, a task that has been deferred thus far. In other words, North Korea again responded after last April to “direct and indirect pressure on Kim Jong Un’s policy direction” raised internally after a no-deal summit in Hanoi last February. It seemed that North Korea needed to reorganize the state management system to brace for a full-blown diplomatic battle in the external front in addition to internal preparations.

Direction of Reorganizing the State Management System

Items on the agenda of this session at the 14th SPA include constitutional amendments and organizational reform. Along the organizational front, the Vice President of the Presidium of SPA Kim Yong-dae was replaced by the formal Chairman of the Central Committee of the Korean Social Democratic Party, Park Young Il. Jung Sechul, formal Chairman of Municipal & Provincial People’s Committees in North Pyongan Province was appointed as the member of the Legislation Committee of the SPA. Son Yong-hoon was appointed as the Chief Cabinet Secretariat. This personnel reshuffling was designed to supplement the manpower needed to carry out a series of policies in the second half of this year following

the appointments of major heads of state organizations last April.

Another major item on the agenda was the constitutional amendment made again after last April. Through this amendment, “the authority of the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission was reinforced for the Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un” and the status of the relevant state organizations was elevated and their role adjusted guaranteed by the law. The status and role between Chairman of the State Affairs Commission and President of the Presidium of the SPA (Choe Ryong-hae), which was a controversial issue during the constitutional amendments last April, was sorted out. The amendment now stipulates that the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission holds greater authority in governance. In the following section, the intentions and purpose of major decisions will be analyzed.

Bracing for Kim Jong Un-led Diplomatic Battle for Bolstering “Strategic Status and National Power”

The North Korean regime proclaimed that the legal strengthening of the status and authority of Chairman Kim through amendments was to “elevate strategic status and national power.” To that end, the North Korean authority, represented by Choe Ryong-hae, emphasized that Chairman Kim’s “absolute authority should be guaranteed at all costs” and “the authority of the state organizations and its system should be supplemented by relevant laws.” It could be evaluated as an internal move of internal discipline based on the Chairman Kim-led system and to reorganize the system of state organizations in preparation for a possible full-blown diplomatic battle amidst growing uncertainties regarding the current situation in Northeast Asia. The contents, intentions, and purposes of the amendment in Provision 6 of the North Korean Constitution “State Organizations” are as follows. First, the mandate and authority of the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission have been strengthened. The amendment stipulates that the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission is not elected as a Deputy of the SPA and that the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission will be in charge of pronouncing important decrees and decisions at the Legislation Committee and the State Affairs Commission, and in the appointing and recalling

of diplomatic representatives dispatched abroad. The North seems to have concurred that considering the status of the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission, the supreme leader of the DPRK, it is not appropriate for Chairman Kim to also assume the position of the Deputy of the SPA, which is a mere propositional representative and that the process of going through the election to become Deputy was not proper given the Chairman's monolithic leadership. What is important is the elevated authority to appoint diplomatic representatives dispatched in foreign countries and to summon them back to the home country. Chairman Kim legalized and institutionalized the authority to appoint a diplomatic representative who will serve as his right-hand man in line with him being in direct control of external policies.

Adjustment of the Roles and Authority of Major State Organizations

Next is the adjustment of the roles and authority of major state organizations, including the State Affairs Commission. North Korea reformed and renamed the existing National Defence Commission as the State Affairs Commission in a 2016 constitutional amendment, having its status established as "the supreme policy guidance organization in terms of national sovereignty." Its status and roles continue to be strengthened to this day. In the second session of the 14th SPA, held in line with the recent movements, Chairman Kim's status and authority were strengthened and the mandate and authority of the State Affairs Commission, the Presidium, and the SPA were adjusted.

It was proclaimed that the mandate and authority of the State Affairs Commission will include overseeing and responding to the implementation of the Chairman's orders and the Commission's decrees, decisions, and instructions. It was also announced that the authority of appointing diplomatic representatives has been officially transferred to the State Affairs Commission and that the mandate and authority of the Presidium of the SPA and its Chairman, which formally represented the DPRK in the international community, were defined as being in charge of overseeing relevant organizations' implementation of Chairman's decisions. It indicates that Choe Ryong-hae is simply in charge of the implementation according

to orders of Chairman Kim under the Chairman Kim-led state management system.

Kim Jong Un's Perception on International Affairs and Involvement in International Conflicts

What should be noted after this SPA session is how Chairman Kim's diplomatic battle will unfold after he named the deadline "the end of this year." Chairman Kim's perception on international affairs is summed up as "confronting head-on the hegemony war between superpowers." The important point of perception of Chairman Kim, who sees a deadline of no later than 2020, on the situation in Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula is the "geopolitical advantage." Chairman Kim already revealed his perception on the international situation in his speech that "our country is geographically located between superpowers, is divided, and faces increasingly intense confrontations and contradictions of major super powers that are poised for securing the hegemony both in the region and the world amidst the growing maneuvers of hostile forces trying to deter, undermine, and suppress the DPRK."

Against this backdrop, Chairman Kim appeared to prepare for diplomatic battles to go beyond its strategy of utilizing superpowers' conflicts. North Korea's traditional strategy on foreign affairs was aimed at maximizing its interests by leveraging superpowers' conflicts. This line of diplomatic strategy of the North still remains valid. However, its strategy seems to go beyond these traditional patterns from 2018 until today after North Korea declared itself a de-facto nuclear state at the end of 2017. North Korea, through diplomacy, now attempts to engage in international conflict structure going beyond Northeast Asia, thereby strengthening Chairman Kim's status and elevating its strategic values.

Recent Diplomatic Patterns of North Korea

Major patterns can be identified by analyzing North Korea's diplomatic patterns, revealed in Rodong Sinmun and the Korean Central News Agency ever

since no deal was reached in Hanoi last February. The first is a cautiousness in improving bilateral relations with China and Russia as well as forging North-China-Russia solidarity against the U.S. North Korea is taking very cautious stance in trilateral military agreements considering possible negotiations with the U.S. Second is its move to undermine the South-U.S.-Japan alliance. North Korea demands that the U.S. come up with an alternative after adjusting its calculations in dealing with the North and that the South be independent from the U.S. and Japan and that Japan compensate North Korea for damages involving colonization, that go beyond war-time reparations. Third is stimulating the so-called “movement not to join the block,” which is diplomacy by small and mid-sized countries trying to change the power structure of the UN. This movement includes “non-alliance against the imperialism” and the movement of solidarity of small and mid-sized countries in defiance to the U.S.-led world order that the North joined in 1975. In international conferences, North Korea has recently urged countries that are non-permanent members of the UN Security Council to demonstrate class actions and engage in anti-imperialism initiatives, while criticizing imperialist behaviors of the 21st century.

Future Prospects

Lastly, Chairman Kim officially remains firm on the gradual lifting of sanctions, which are pressing issues to be addressed from the North’s perspective, depending on the progress of the “denuclearization-peace regime” talks. However, resolving this issue seems very difficult under the current stalemate. Against this backdrop, North Korea tries to strengthen its cooperation with (relatively) pro-North Korea countries, such as China and Russia. However, this strategy will not be sustainable given the U.S.-China trade war and Russia’s poor national budget.

Therefore, it is likely that on political diplomatic fronts, the North could escalate military tensions toward the U.S. with the testing of strategic nuclear weapons, including ICBMs and SLBMs, if there is no progress on negotiations with the U.S. On the economic diplomatic fronts, North Korea could attempt to render sanctions invalid by utilizing cyber space and engaging in unofficial activities between



actors in provincial governments and each economic unit. Various types of unofficial diplomatic activities could be expanded that could evade sanctions imposed on the North and international norms. Pyongyang could also launch international efforts to strengthen official and unofficial communications with relatively pro-North Korea and anti-American countries and international organizations. ©KINU 2019

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