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Why Did Chairman Kim Jong Un Order the Removal of Tourist Facilities at Mt. Geumgang?

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Chairman Kim Jong Un ordered the removal of South Korean-built facilities at the Mt. Geumgang resort during his field guidance. Various opinions mount over why Chairman Kim gave such an order at a time of impasse in inter-Korean relations. To sum up his remarks made during the field guidance to Mt. Geumgang: 1) he expressed the will to complete the tourism industry projects that have been consistently carried out ever since he came into power; 2) he reaffirmed the will to root out the bureaucracy prevalent in the North Korean regime; 3) he will not allow a complete breakdown of dialogue in inter-Korean relations; and 4) he delivered a message toward the South to make more active efforts for the improvement of inter-Korean relations. The incumbent ROK government conducts inter-Korean relations in sync with current U.S.-North Korea relations. However, at a time of stalemate in U.S.-North Korea relations, it is necessary for the two Koreas to take the initiative in improving their relations. 'Tourism' could be considered as a medium in the process.

Various opinions mount over why Chairman Kim Jong Un ordered the removal of South Korean-built tourist facilities at Mt. Geumgang. According to Rodong Sinmun, on October 23, 2019, Chairman Kim took a tour of facilities built by South

Korea during his field guidance to the Mt. Geumgang tourist zone and claimed that “Those facilities are not only backward in terms of aesthetic and architectural quality, but also look shabby as they are not properly taken care of.” He then instructed to “completely remove all the unpleasant-looking South Korean-built facilities with an agreement with the relevant unit of the South and build new modern service facilities in our own way that would complement the mountain’s natural scenery.”

What is at issue is an interpretation over Chairman Kim’s remarks of “complete removal.” Various analyses have come out over the meaning of his remarks, including as an expression of his dissatisfaction with inter-Korean relations and as the application of more pressure on the U.S. for the easing of sanctions. Why then did Chairman Kim order the removal of South Korean-built facilities at the Mt. Geumgang resort at this time?

Expression of Active Will for the Tourist Zone’s Development

To understand the overall content of his remarks, one needs to look at the situation of the new special economic zone currently being pursued by North Korea. As of 2018, North Korea had designated a total of 28 special economic zones, 9 at the central government level and 19 at the provincial government level. Among those at the central government level, ‘Wonsan-Mount Geumgang International Tourist Zone’ and Mt. Geumgang Tourist Special Zone are included as zones selected for tourism development.¹⁾ It indicates that Mt. Geumgang’s value as a tourism resource is huge. In fact, since Kim Jong Un took power, North Korea has actively carried out the development of its tourism sector, such as in the Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist zone. Chairman Kim has frequently conducted field guidance in tourist zones, demonstrating his high expectations for the tourism sector.

To Chairman Kim, who has such a high hope for Mt. Geumgang as a tourism

1) The Mt. Geumgang Tourist Special Zone geographically belongs to the Wonsan-Mount Geumgang International Tourist Zone. However, a Special Economic Zone Law is applied to the Mt. Geumgang Tourist Special Zone while an Economic Development Zone Law is applied to the Wonsan-Mount Geumgang International Tourist Zone.

asset, obsolete facilities that have been abandoned for around 10 years after the halting of tourism in 2008 may have seemed shabby compared to the Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist zone that is recently emerging with newly constructed facilities. These tacky-looking facilities may have been viewed as serious obstacles to the competition of the special tourist zone that he mapped out.

In that regard, it is evaluated that Chairman Kim instructed the active removal of old facilities and the construction of new ones to promptly complete the Wonsan-Mount Geumgang International Tourist Zone. In fact, Chairman Kim, in his field guidance on October 23, set up ‘a master development plan for the Mt. Geumgang tourist zone,’ divided the plan into 3-4 phases, ordered the construction of the Kosong Port coastal tourist area, Pirobong mountaineering tourist area, Haegumgang coastal park area, and sports cultural area. They were expressions of his will to actively develop tourism resources at Mt. Geumgang followed by the Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist zone.

Practical issues may have been considered in his calculations. The number of Chinese tourists visiting North Korea is rapidly rising and, in 2018 alone, 1.2 million Chinese visitors came to North Korea. However, the tourist spots in North Korea are very limited in the midst of this dramatic increase of Chinese tourists. That is why the recovery of poorly managed facilities at the Mt. Geumgang resort may have been more of an urgent priority for North Korea. Through recovery, North Korea may have been trying to actively attract foreign tourists.

Pointing Out the Ills of Bureaucracy

Chairman Kim Jong Un, ever since he came into power, has consistently pointed out the ills of bureaucracy rooted in North Korean society and declared to eliminate its root cause. In fact, Chairman Kim underscored the removal of bureaucracy-based corruption in his 2019 New Years’ Day speech. He went on to emphasize at a politburo meeting of the ruling Workers’ Party’s Central Committee on April 9, 2019 that “all these negative practices, including this deep-seated formalism, trick-centered approach, subjectivism, protectionism, defeatism, party

influence, and bureaucracy should be rooted out.”

Chairman Kim expressed his discontent with North Korean officials while looking around hastily-built facilities that failed to harmonize with the beauty of their natural surroundings. ‘Predecessors,’ in other words, former officials in charge, were reprimanded for simply allowing the South to build tourist facilities with such an ease and letting them construct unpleasant-looking facilities and thus damage the natural scenery.

In addition, he directly pointed out that “the unit in charge of policy guidance at the Mt. Geumgang tourism service opened up the bulk of the land of the Mt. Geumgang tourism zone to South Korea and failed to manage cultural tourist sites.” Although Hyundai Asan owned the business license for 50 years from the start of its tourism business, North Korea unilaterally canceled Hyundai’s exclusive business license on April 2011 and confiscated South Korea’s facilities and assets within the Mt. Geumgang tourist resort on April 2010. Therefore, Chairman Kim seemed to harshly reproach North Korean officials for abandoning and not properly managing facilities and for failing to show initiative for restoration and refurbishment even though the responsibility for the management of the Mt. Geumgang tourist facilities has rested with North Korea since 2011.

Two-way Messages for Inter-Korean Relations

As an intense analysis has begun on Chairman Kim’s remarks of “complete removal,” one could derive from it various meanings it has in regard to inter-Korean relations by looking at the context before and after those remarks were made. First, what should be noted among Chairman Kim’s order to “completely remove all the tacky-looking South Korean-built facilities with an agreement with the relevant unit of the South” is the phrase, “with an agreement with the relevant unit of the South.” Even though the decision of elimination of facilities at the Mt. Geumgang resort came out of nowhere, he nonetheless instructed his officials to do so in coordination with the South. This indicates that Chairman Kim is aware of the symbolic meaning that Mt. Geumgang tourism has on inter-Korean relations and that he expressed the will

to have a dialogue where necessary.

However, it could also be suggested it was his indirect criticism about current inter-Korean relations. He said that “currently Mt. Geumgang tourism is not available without the improvement of North-South relations, but it is clearly a wrong practice and wrong perception” and that “if South Korean compatriots would come to Mt. Geumgang’s globally renowned tourist spot, they will always be welcomed.” Such remarks were his way of expressing grievances on the lack of progress on the resumption of the Mt. Geumgang Tourism Project even though the leaders of the two Koreas “agreed, as conditions mature, to first normalize the Mt. Geumgang Tourism Project,” and Chairman Kim expressed his intent to resume the Mt. Geumgang Tourism Project in his 2019 New Year’s Day speech.

In fact, individual tourism is not subject to UN Security Council’s sanctions. A normal trade activity that occurs during an individual’s travel is exempted from the U.S.’s sanctions regulations as an exception. Therefore, Chairman Kim appeared to criticize the current situation where South Koreans are not allowed to visit Mt. Geumgang due to South Korea’s May 24th sanctions imposed on North Korea even when the current sanctions do not limit or ban individual tour to Mt. Geumgang.

In addition, he stated that “a policy dependent on others is extremely wrong” and that “it is not desirable to let the South have the initiative on the Mt. Geumgang Tourism Project.” Such a statement suggests that he will take over the drive of the development project in Mt. Geumgang if South Korea does not show clear will to resume the project and that even if the South decides to participate in a project, a multi-year exclusive business license will not be guaranteed as it was in the past. Furthermore, his will was expressed that policy decisions made by his predecessors at other sectors, beyond the Mt. Geumgang Tourism Project, will be boldly corrected if those decisions prove to be wrong and that he could always choose an approach different from the previous regimes in future North Korea-U.S. negotiations.

In his field guidance to Mt. Geumgang, Chairman Kim instructed the active removal of old facilities and construction of new ones by frequently using terms such as ‘our own way’ and ‘nationality.’ It could be interpreted that he attempted to consolidate his leadership by climbing up Mt. Baekdu on the back of a white horse

a week before this field guidance and that he sought to show a path of ‘self-reliance’ and a ‘new way’ through the following field guidance to Mt. Geumgang. To sum up his remarks made during the field guidance to Mt. Geumgang: 1) he expressed the will to complete the tourism industry projects that have been consistently carried out ever since he rose to power; 2) he reaffirmed the will to root out the bureaucracy prevalent in the North Korean regime; 3) he will not allow a complete breakdown of dialogue in inter-Korean relations; and 4) he delivered a message toward the South to make more active efforts for the improvement of inter-Korean relations.

The current ROK government conducts inter-Korean relations in sync with current U.S.-North Korea relations. However, at a time of stalemate in U.S.-North Korea relations, it is necessary for the two Koreas to take the initiative in improving their relations. The starting point could be the ‘tourism industry.’ ©KINU 2019

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