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Assessment of the Fifth General-Level Military Talks between North and South Korea

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Koreans have great hope that military tensions on the Korean peninsula will soon subside. Amidst these wishes, the fifth general-level military talks between North and South Korea were held from May 8 to 11 at the Tongil Pavilion in Panmunjom on the Northern side. The talks were originally planned for three days, but went over schedule by one day, and after the meetings a joint statement was announced that involved five items concerning the agreement and carrying into effect a letter of agreement on military guarantees of the test operations of trains crossing North and South Korea. First, both Koreas will continue to discuss issues such as preventing military conflicts in West Sea and designating joint fishery areas. They will also discuss the direct voyage of North Korean civilian ships into Haeju Bay as soon as military trust is established in West Sea. Second, the two countries have adopted and agreed to carry into effect the temporary agreement that militarily guarantees the test-run of trains that will cross North and South Korea on May 17. They also agreed to discuss the issue of adopting a military guarantee agreement for allowing the passage of railways and roads between the two countries. They also decided to talk about measures on military guarantees concerning the prevention of flood damage in the Imjin River and harvesting of aggregates from the mouth of the Han River. Third, North and South Korea made commitments to thoroughly adhere to the military agreements already adopted by both countries, and, in case of violations of the agreement in the process of implementation, to report the case to the other party so that the other party can make all efforts to prevent further instances of violating the agreements. Fourth, North and South Korea agreed to actively cooperate in hosting the second defense minister-level meeting as soon as possible, following the progress of the general-level military talks. Fifth, both countries agreed to host the sixth general-level military talks in July, and discuss specific plans through notifications in due course.

Due to the military guarantee of the test operations of trains though the recent talks, railways have opened between North and South Korea for the first time in fifty years. For the test operations, the two countries have agreed to temporarily each open 10 meters of military lines of demarcation at points where railways

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in regions managed by North and South come in contact, from 9 AM to 5 PM on May 17. It was also agreed that the speed of the train would be 20-30 kilometers, and stop at agreed demarcation stations to conduct inspections on personnel, equipment, and freight.

The reason why North Korea's military agreed to military guarantee measures concerning the test operations of trains after these meetings, in contrast to the opposition it had expressed the previous year, seems not entirely unrelated to the South's proposal of providing raw materials for light industries and proposals for joint development of subterranean resources. For North Korea, which is emphasizing economic rehabilitation as its highest priority, it would be difficult for the military to disregard the proposal of supporting raw materials for light industries and cooperative projects for joint development of subterranean resources under the condition of executing the test operations of trains. North and South Korea had agreed to conduct joint field investigations for subterranean resources in three mines in the Danchun region of Hamgyungnamdo (Gumduk mine: zinc, Ryongyang mine: magnesite, Daeheung mine: magnesite) from June 25 to July 6 for the purpose of developing subterranean resources in North Korea, through the second working-level light industries and subterranean resource development cooperation discussions (from May 2 to 4 at the Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation Consultation Office in Gaeseong). The two Koreas also agreed that South Korea will provide the first batch of the 80 million dollars worth of raw materials for light industry as promised (500 tons of polyester staple fiber) on June 27.

There were agreements between the two Koreas that preventing military conflicts in West Sea and establishing joint fisheries are urgent in order to ease tensions and establish peace. It is expected that this agreement would be helpful in preventing direct military conflicts like the Yunpyung naval hostilities in 1999 and the West Sea hostilities in 2002 during fishing season for crabs. North Korea had originally proposed a sensitive expression of 'joint seas' concerning the joint fisheries issue, but ultimately the South Korean proposal of 'joint fishery seas' was selected. Meanwhile, other notable results included the agreement that the sixth general-level talks would be held in July, and recognizing the importance of holding a second round of defense minister-level talks, which were suspended since September 2000. These results are important in that they provide the opportunities to continue and elevate the 'channels for dialogue between military authorities.'

Meantime, there are disappointments from the military talks as well. First is the fact that the military guarantee of test operations of the trains on the 17th was concluded as a one-time only 'temporary agreement,' as had been expected. The assessment is that the permanent military guarantee agreement has been held back until the next meeting, so this meeting was insufficient. A ground for optimism is that the military authorities of North and South Korea have agreed to continue to discuss these issues.

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Another disappointment is that the meeting ended with intentions to discuss solutions for military guarantees concerning the preventive measures of flood disasters from the Imjin river, and projects to gather aggregates from the mouth of the Han river. It is likely that there will be a give and take between the two Koreas, with the South demanding the permanent military guarantees for railways and road passage, harvesting aggregates from the mouth of the Han river, and preventing flood disasters from the Imjin river, and with the strong demands by the North for a direct passage of North Korean ships into Haeju Bay.

It is said that the direct passage of North Korean ships to Haeju Bay is a long cherished wish of North Korea, and the North had demanded it during the third and fourth general-level talks. Because the South opposed the proposal on the grounds that the ships would have to cross the NLL in Yunpyeongdo in order to make the direct passage, the discussion would continue amid controversy. There are some explanations that the intent of North Korea's demand for direct passage is economic, such as reducing time for freight transportation and logistics costs such as petrol. But a more realistic interpretation would be to annul the NLL from a long-term perspective.