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Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between South Korea and Cuba, and Unification Diplomacy

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The Republic of Korea and the Republic of Cuba normalized diplomatic ties that remained broken for a considerable period of time. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea announced on February 14 that “The Republic of Korea and the Republic of Cuba agreed to establish ambassador-level diplomatic relations between the two countries through an exchange of diplomatic notes between the Permanent Missions to the United Nations of the two countries in New York, the United States.” South Korea and Cuba established diplomatic relations in 1949 but exchanges between the two countries were cut off since Cuba’s socialist revolution. It took 65 years for the two countries to agree on restoring diplomatic relations.

Since the 2010s, South Korea has made consistent efforts towards resuming diplomatic relations with Cuba. While the Cuban government was not opposed to restoring diplomatic ties with South Korea to overcome economic issues and international isolation, it delayed making a decision because of its long-standing anti-American practices and diplomatic relations with Pyongyang. However, South Korea’s persistent diplomatic efforts and continuous exchanges with Cuba eventually led to the agreement on restoring diplomatic relations. Consequently, North Korea’s diplomatic isolation is expected to deepen further, while South Korea’s diplomatic

horizon as the ‘Global Pivotal State’ is likely to expand.

The agreement to resume diplomatic relations with Cuba raises important issues for South Korea’s unification diplomacy. Firstly, there is a need to expand cooperation with the Global South. This is crucial not only in the broader context of South Korea’s foreign policy but also in garnering international support for the issue of unification. The Global South represents a significant diplomatic asset in this regard. Efforts to form a common understanding between the populace of South Korea and Cuba leveraging not only political and economic cooperation but also K-culture are also important.

Secondly, it is necessary to secure support for South Korea’s unification policies and further expand them. Establishment of diplomatic relations presupposes comprehensive cooperation based on respect for sovereignty and the constitution of the two nations. In this context, it is important to obtain explicit support from Cuba for South Korea’s peaceful unification policy based on free and democratic principles enshrined in the constitution of South Korea.

Thirdly, the impact of Cuban refugees or international migrants on the Cuban society and economy should be examined for South Korea’s policies for North Korean defectors. It is known that due to economic difficulties and open lifestyle, some Cuban families have their members work overseas including the US and travel between such countries and Cuba frequently. It is necessary to assess the influence of their nationality, remittances, and family reunions on the Cuban economy and society. This is important because as the number of North Korean defectors entering the country decreases, attention will shift to the impact of the relationship between North Korean defectors and their families in North Korea on social changes and policies toward North Korea. In addition, observations on Cuba’s political and economic reforms alongside comparative studies on North Korea will enrich South Korea’s unification policies. This underscores the need for exchanges between policy research groups in South Korea and Cuba. ©KINU 2024

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