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The Establishment of NCG Framework and Responses of North Korea and Neighboring Countries

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Preparation for a Full-Fledged ‘Nuclear-based’ Alliance

On February 14, 2024, the ROK’s Ministry of National Defense and the U.S. Department of Defense announced that both entered a new phase of discussions on strengthening extended deterrence against North Korea by signing the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) framework document at the Pentagon. The NCG, initiated by the *Washington Declaration* between President Yoon Suk Yeol and President Joe Biden in April 2023, has been rapidly evolving into a comprehensive interagency mechanism for integrated extended deterrence. This process ensures the will and operational capability of the two countries through consultations between Office of National Security and the U.S. National Security Council as well as a working-level consultation between the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) and the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD).

Both countries are expected to establish guidelines for nuclear strategy planning and operations by mid-2024, and they are likely to develop an action plan for nuclear use in times of crisis as well. This indicates a shift towards an “active and cooperative” structure, where both nations share nuclear information and jointly plan and execute operations, which marks a departure from a framework where the U.S.

retaliates against a North Korean nuclear attack using its own nuclear capabilities. In the upcoming 3rd NCG in June of this year, discussions will focus on information sharing, strategic communication, decision-making, nuclear weapon operational planning and exercises led by the MND and the DOD. In August, the Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS) exercise will be conducted based on nuclear operation scenarios. The Korean military is pursuing the establishment of a Strategic Command with the aim of effectively operating the Korean version of three-axis system and building a system for the integrated execution of ROK-U.S. nuclear and conventional operations by the second half of 2024. If processes under the NCG are carried out smoothly and a collaborative system between the Strategic Commands of both countries is established, NCG's activities may be evaluated as having moved one step closer to the operational planning phase.

North Korea's Resistance, Japan's Interest, China's Concern and Vigilance

In response to such efforts to strengthen the operational capability of the NCG, North Korea continues to resist, and there is a high possibility that it will escalate its offensive through various low- to high-intensity provocations in 2024. For instance, following the 2nd meeting of the ROK-U.S. NCG in last December, North Korea criticized the outcome of the NCG meeting and denounced the exercise plan including nuclear employment scenarios during the August UFS period as “explicit declaration of nuclear confrontation.” Through a series of provocative actions before, during and after the ROK-U.S. joint military drills like UFS, North Korea may seek to increase pressure on the ROK and the U.S. simultaneously aiming to neutralize ROK-U.S. joint responses to North Korea and delay the institutionalization of the NCG. Recently, North Korea has mentioned the protection of maritime sovereignty over the Yellow Sea (West Sea), suggesting the possibility of employing a gray zone strategy that utilizes coercive means to maximize the effectiveness of provocations while avoiding escalation.

Regarding Japan, the possibility of Japan's participation in the ROK-U.S. NCG has

been consistently raised since the early stages of its establishment, aligning with the strengthened trilateral security cooperation among the ROK, the United States, and Japan. There are discussions on the effectiveness of Japan's participation due to public sensitivity regarding the issue of nuclear weapon use in times of crisis, and the sustainability of the friendly bilateral relations restored between the ROK and Japan. In addition, the existence of U.S.-Japan Extended Deterrence Dialogue (EDD) has questioned the necessity of joining the NCG. However, with the stabilization process of the ROK-U.S. NCG, Japan's direct or indirect participation in NCG related activities may be considered in terms of trilateral strategic and operational approach for enhancing deterrence against North Korea.

Since last year, China has maintained concerns and vigilance against the NCG. China expressed its concerns regarding the NCG meeting. In this context, China explained about North Korea's provocations and even took sides with the North while emphasizing the constructive role of the ROK-U.S. alliance, rather than military suppression and pressure. In particular, China is paying attention to the possible future role of the NCG expanding beyond deterring North Korea to become a main mechanism that keeps China in check. To prevent such expansion of roles, China may escalate its criticism of the NCG, and particularly the UFS exercise in August, where joint exercises will be conducted using nuclear-based scenarios.

Policy Considerations

Exercises are a key for ROK and the U.S. to build and operate the system necessary in strengthening extended deterrence. Central to the stable execution of the agreements reached within the NCG is the joint ROK-U.S. nuclear employment exercises. It is essential to have a clear understanding of missions and roles under common objectives and to enhance interoperability based on this understanding. While comprehension and exchange of technical concepts, and smooth communication are vital, the frequency of joint exercises ultimately guarantees the level of operational readiness. The diverse tangible and intangible assets contributed by both nations

in the training process should be regarded not simply as utilization but as “accumulation.” In this regard, considering the discontinuation of joint exercises in the future due to changes in the ROK-U.S. or U.S.-North Korea relations is not desirable.

In addition, it is important for the ROK government to send a consistent message on the denuclearization of North Korea and emphasize the fact that the evolution of the ROK-U.S. alliance relations into a nuclear-based alliance has been prompted by and a response to North Korea’s advanced nuclear capabilities and its determination to become a *de facto* nuclear state as well as the various forms of the North’s military provocations.

The continued development of nuclear planning and operational training based on the NCG can be effectively managed through robust institutional frameworks. The solidity of these frameworks serves to enhance confidence in deterrence and plays a role in conveying consistent messages to North Korea. The possibility of both major and minor changes always exists, regardless of the administration that comes into power after the U.S. presidential election. It would be advisable for the ROK to emphasize the significance of the NCG consultations and the value of continuity based on the meaning of a “nuclear-based alliance” to the U.S., while also preparing for potential expansion of the ROK’s role and burden within this context. ©KINU 2024

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