

Trump Administration's North Korean Policy and South Korea's Challenges Ahead

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The Trump administration's North Korean policy is being visualized in the name of 'maximum pressure and engagement.' Trump, who has criticized North Korea's provocative actions while pushing for sanctions and pressure since his inauguration in January, said in a media interview on May 1 that he would meet with Kim Jong-un under the 'right circumstances.' On May 3, Rex Tillerson, the US Secretary of State, addressed the State Department emphasizing the need to pressure North Korea with all possible means. He also declared the 4-No principles, aimed to guarantee the integrity of the North Korean regime - a guarantee of not attempting the regime change, the regime collapse, the acceleration of unification, and an advancement to the North beyond the 38th parallel. Thus, he implied the possibility of a negotiation with the North. If so, will the US-DPRK relationship be able to enter a new phase in the Trump era? This article analyzes Trump's policy on North Korea and prospects for the US-DPRK relationship and ultimately lays out challenges facing the South Korean government.

Strategic Patience vs. Engagement with Maximum Pressure

The basic framework of the Trump administration's maximum pressure and engagement policy is similar to that of the Obama administration's strategic patience - ultimately achieving denuclearization by encouraging North Korea's change through pressure and bringing the North to the negotiating table. However, there are important differences in the two administrations' recognition and policies on North Korea. First, there is a different level of recognition on the importance and urgency of resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. President Obama rarely mentioned the North Korean nuclear issue directly and the strategic patience had been regarded as an ignorance strategy toward the North. Trump, on the other hand, has repeatedly raised the North Korea's nuclear issue stressing its urgency and importance and immediately criticized the North's provocation right after its missile test. Moreover, the core agenda of the US-China summit in April was the North Korean nuclear issue. In his address to the State Department on May 3, Tillerson first mentioned the North Korean nuclear issue as one of the most urgent issues facing America. This clear rise of North Korea's nuclear issue in the US policy priorities has been attributed to the increased awareness of a threat posed by North Korea's advanced nuclear and missile capabilities.

Second, the pressure placed on North Korea has increased in terms of the scope and intensity. Sanctions and pressure imposed on Pyongyang under the Obama administration were mostly limited to the economic sphere with the very little pressure on third-party countries doing trade with North Korea. On the other hand, the Trump administration's pressure on North Korea moves beyond the economic sector into the military and diplomatic areas and is expected to become far more toughened. The announcement of the deployment of Carl Vinson aircraft carrier to the Korean Peninsula, followed by air raids in Syria last April, brought about a talk of preemptive strike as a likely scenario, which was a result of the US intention to militarily pressure the North by escalating tensions. Tillerson also urged all nations to halt or degrade the diplomatic ties with North Korea in his UN Security Council

address on April 28. Also, the Trump administration is pushing for strengthening sanctions in the economic sector, demanding China to restrict its oil supply to North Korea. President Trump also publicly proclaimed that the US government will not hesitate to enforce sanctions on third-party countries engaging in North Korea's illegal activities.

Third, the Trump government's message to North Korea, designed to induce the North to dialogue and negotiation, is very positive. Trump sent a clear signal acknowledging Kim Jong-un as a dialogue partner. In his speech on May 3, Tillerson declared the 4-No principles promising not to threaten the North Korean regime. In fact, it is very unusual for the US president to mention the possibility of the US-DPRK summit. And 4-No principles contain very positive and proactive approach, which virtually guarantees non-aggression and the integrity of the regime. Furthermore, the conditions for resuming a dialogue seem to be easing. The Obama administration urged North Korea to show a genuine willingness for denuclearization and presented conditions for resuming a dialogue – return of the IAEA inspectors to North Korea and nuclear freeze. Ambassador Hailey under the Trump administration, however, announced that the dialogue is only possible when North Korea completely abandons nuclear development and related tests. This implies that the resumption of dialogue is viable merely by halting nuclear and missile tests even without the North expressing willingness for denuclearization.

Prospects for the US-DRPK Relations: Opportunities and Challenges

The Trump administration's policy toward North Korea, which contains proactive signals both for engagement and pressure, suggests that the dialogue and negotiation phases may come about in the future. However, it is hard to be optimistic yet and there are opportunities and challenges ahead. To begin with, an opportunity can be the US recognition of the urgency of resolving the North Korean nuclear issue and its proactive message to the North. The US has become increasingly aware of the urgent need to address the North Korean nuclear and missile threats before

the North attacks the US mainland, which leaves Washington running against time. The proposed solution is based on negotiations pursued under the premise of the 'right circumstances.' Especially, the 4-No principles have meaningful implications for what the North Korean regime has emphasized so far – the US scrapping of hostile policies toward the North and guarantee of the integrity of the regime, thereby increasing the incentives for the North to have negotiations with the US.

Recognizing the urgency of the North Korean nuclear issue can also bring about the dialogue phase by either materializing or lowering the conditions for resuming the US-DPRK dialogue and negotiation goals. It is possible that the halt of nuclear and missile tests would be regarded as 'right circumstances' that could lead to initiate a dialogue. And the US may take a gradual approach to set the primary negotiation goal as nuclear and missile freeze, including the return of IAEA inspectors and put the goal of denuclearization at the back burner. At present, the freezing of nuclear and missile programs alone will be a significant achievement for America, which will eliminate the security threat posed to the US mainland. And the North is more likely to agree to sit at the negotiating table since such approach is not aiming for nuclear renunciation. Therefore, even if the pressure continues for the time being, the dialogue phase may unfold in the second half of this year after the Trump administration has completed appointing officials tasked with the policy implementation, such as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

The most formidable challenge facing the US-DPRK relationship is the possibility of Pyongyang's sixth nuclear test and ICBM launch. Since the inauguration of President Trump, North Korea has not conducted a nuclear test and ICBM launch except several ballistic missile tests. There is a positive signal for opening the potential dialogue phase in the future – North Korea does not attempt to cross the red line that could seriously provoke the US. Noticeably, the head of the North America department of the North Korean foreign ministry, Choi Sun-hee, recently had a 1.5-track dialogue with the US counterpart in Norway, during which she said

that North Korea is willing to talk to the US if the conditions are met. However, if Pyongyang conducts a sixth nuclear test, especially an ICBM launch, it will not only reduce the possibility for dialogue, but also potentially trigger a serious military crisis. This is because the talk of a preemptive strike can then come to the surface as an option in the US. Furthermore, even ballistic missile tests, which fall short of an ICBM-class, are likely to obstruct the resumption of dialogue and escalate tensions between the US and North Korea.

Remaining Challenges for South Korea

The main purpose of North Korea's nuclear development is to maintain the integrity of the regime. And the main threat to the integrity of the regime that North Korea perceives is the US. Therefore, the North Korean nuclear issue is inseparable from the US-DPRK relationship. And it will be difficult to achieve denuclearization without improving US-DPRK relationship first. The preemptive strike on North Korea means another war breaking out on the Korean Peninsula, which is not an acceptable option to South Korea. It is unlikely to achieve the denuclearization with sanctions and pressure alone, for North Korea regards nuclear weapons as a lifeline, and this is clearly recognized by the Trump administration. In the end, it is crucial to resume the US-DPRK dialogue and open a negotiation whether it be six- or four-party talks or bilateral talks.

South Korea's leading role is imperative to create the dialogue and negotiation phase between Washington and Pyongyang and to yield meaningful results. For now, North Korea has yet to cross the red line that could seriously provoke America and the US has sent positive messages to North Korea. However, it is still difficult to affirm the intention of the two parties in the midst of ballistic missile tests and the intensifying pressure on North Korea. Therefore, first, South Korea should restore its dialogue channel with North Korea and establish a foundation for engagement policy. Also, South Korea should induce the North into a path of

temporary halt of nuclear and missile tests by conveying the willingness and the plan to adopt an engagement policy agreed upon with the US. And the South Korean government can also convey North Korea's intention back to the US serving as a bridge and facilitate the US-DPRK dialogue by creating the 'right circumstances' agreed by the two parties.

In this process, dispatching a special envoy to North Korea will be proven effective and coordination with the US and North Korea is necessary for setting the realistic conditions for reopening a dialogue and creating the agenda for negotiations. In addition, at the ROK-US summit scheduled at the end of June, the two states should reaffirm the 4-No principles, promising to guarantee the non-aggression approach, the integrity of the North Korean regime, and reduction of the ROK-US joint military drill. And in return, the ROK can call for North Korea to stop nuclear and missile tests and come back to the negotiating table in the form of a joint declaration agreed by heads of South Korea and the US. It is important to ensure that the US-DPRK dialogue should begin under the condition of temporary nuclear and missile freeze. And realistically, the agenda for the first negotiation should be nuclear and missile freeze. While the ultimate goal is denuclearization, a gradual approach is more realistic and effective with a primary goal for negotiation on nuclear and missile freeze. However, complete denuclearization should be sought in parallel with the establishment of the peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

The ROK government should promote a virtuous cycle between resolving North Korean nuclear issue and improving inter-Korean relations. While the resolution of North Korean nuclear issue will facilitate the improvement of inter-Korean relations, the former should not be a precondition for the latter. North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities have been further advanced during the Kim Jong-un regime, during which dialogues and exchanges between the two Koreas have been greatly reduced or even severed. Resuming dialogue and exchanges can contribute to resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. And South Korea's proactive actions in improving inter-Korean relations will also contribute to creating the environment for dialogue and negotiation on the North Korean nuclear issue while

mitigating tensions on the Korean Peninsula. It will also increase South Korea's credibility and status as a facilitator for improving the US-DPRK relations and as a main actor in resolving the Korean Peninsula issue, which will in turn make a negotiation easier on resuming the talks. Considering the current international sanctions imposed on North Korea, it is necessary to adopt a gradual approach in improving the inter-Korean relations. First of all, it is imperative to restore a dialogue channel with the North, consider dispatching a special envoy, and promote social and cultural exchanges, such as the reunion of separated families and humanitarian aids. Moreover, economic cooperation, including the re-opening of Gaeseong Industrial Complex should be actively reviewed in the process of nuclear talks and negotiation. The incumbent ROK government's North Korean policy should be crafted in a direction that promotes a virtuous cycle by adopting the gradual and parallel approach of improving inter-Korean relations and resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. ©KINU 2017

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