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Implications of the ROK-US Summit and Future Challenges

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South Korea and the US held a summit meeting on June 30 – 50 days after President Moon Jae-in’s inauguration. One of the important factors that prompted both countries to hold a summit talks earlier than expected was an awareness shared by both parties of the urgency of resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. The joint statement released after the summit put cooperation on North Korean policy as the most important issue. Resolving the North Korean nuclear issue has become even more urgent since North Korea’s ICBM launch on July 4. To that end, this paper evaluates the achievements and limitations of the ROK-US summit meeting with the focus on resolution of nuclear issue and the promotion of peace on the Korean Peninsula, thereby presenting future challenges facing South Korea.

Foundation of Active Role of the ROK for Peace on the Peninsula

First, one of the important achievements of this summit is that South Korea has been able to secure the US support for taking the initiative on the Korean Peninsula issue. There is no other state than South Korea

whose stakes are the highest at resolving the North Korean nuclear issue and promoting peace on the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, South Korea needs to have the initiative in such matter and its position and policy on peninsular issues should primarily be considered and respected ahead of others in the international community. Unfortunately, there has been a controversy over the so-called 'Korea Passing' with the remaining concerns that the direction of such issue may depend on the strategic interests of super powers, such as the US and China. Therefore, the fact that President Moon Jae-in had consistently emphasized South Korea's leading role on the peninsular issues during his visit to the US and that such statement was specified in the joint declaration has great significance. In addition, the ROK pursuit of regaining the wartime operational control included in the joint declaration is also important in terms of securing the legitimacy and building the groundwork for its leading role on the peninsular issue.

Agreement on the Basic Direction of Resolving North Korean Nuclear Issue

Second, an agreement was reached between the ROK and the US on the basic direction of resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. The heads of two states agreed on the principle that the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula should be achieved through peaceful means, which could have significant implications, given that the US government and the public have thus far raised the possibility of a preemptive strike on North Korea and that the Trump administration announced putting all policy options on the table, including military measures. Furthermore, this agreement with an emphasis that the sanctions are a diplomatic means and dialogue with the North is open under the 'right circumstances' reflects the principle of the Moon administration - sanctions are not a quick-fix and the peninsular issue should be resolved by dialogue and negotiation. It is important to note that in the joint declaration, the two states reaffirmed that both parties do not have hostile policies toward North Korea. It should also be noted that President Moon declared the 4-
-No principles in his CSIS address that both states have no intention of attacking

the North and attempting the regime change or the regime collapse and the acceleration of unification. It carries significance since both states reached a consensus on the need to guarantee the security of the North Korean regime in order to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue.

Ambiguity of the Right Circumstances

Despite a series of important achievements, the summit has its limitations. Unfortunately, it is not clear what the ‘right circumstances’ are when it comes to having a dialogue with North Korea on its nuclear issue. In his June 15 commemorative address, President Moon Jae-in announced that he would be able to have talks with North Korea without strings attached if North Korea were to suspend its nuclear-missile provocations. Moreover, in March, China proposed a way for opening a dialogue with the North that was largely endorsed by Russia - seeking a temporary suspension of North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests in return for a halt of the ROK-US joint military exercises. However, on June 21, North Korean Ambassador to India announced that Pyongyang will not accept the demands for the suspension of nuclear and missile tests in exchange for the halt of the ROK-US joint military drills. Yet, North Korea declared its willingness to negotiate with the US regarding the agenda of nuclear freeze. In spite of proposals of stake-holders, the joint declaration of the ROK-US summit failed to contain specific provisions on the conditions of the dialogue. While it is true that South Korea and the US do not need to accept the proposals of other countries, the need for making a breakthrough to open a dialogue seems obvious - a major remaining challenge in the future.

Gradual and Comprehensive Approach to Denuclearization and the Peace Regime

The denuclearization and the establishment of the peace regime would be the most intractable goals of foreign-security policy for the Moon administration. North Korea’s ICBM launch might make the public turn to the idea that dialogue is useless and that even a preemptive strike is necessary to manage the crisis.

However, it should be noted that North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities have become even more sophisticated and advanced in the midst of toughened sanctions and the hard line policies with the absence of dialogue for the past several years. Also, the fact that a preemptive strike will eventually lead to a war on the Korean Peninsula must not be overlooked. Two countries should continue the endeavor to peacefully resolve the North Korean nuclear issue and such policy principle should also be continuously implemented. In this regard, President Moon's Berlin Declaration released on July 6 carries significance since it reaffirms the 4-No principle on the security of the North Korean regime and the importance of peaceful resolution through dialogue and negotiation.

As the Moon Jae-in government emphasizes, it is necessary to fresh out a gradual and comprehensive approach, starting from the freezing of the North Korean nuclear program to the establishment of denuclearization and the peace regime. The background of this approach assumes that North Korea, as a de facto nuclear state, will not likely to accept the conditions of denuclearization as the negotiation agenda. In addition, it should be acknowledged that it is necessary to establish a process of building a mutual trust, which could remove a threat posed to the North Korean regime in order to move onto a path of denuclearization. Therefore, the process of lowering the threshold for resuming a dialogue and establishing the circumstances should be taken as a first step, followed by negotiations for the implementation of nuclear and missile freezing and verification. In the final step, it is realistic and effective to discuss having a parallel approach of establishment of denuclearization and the peace regime.

Creating Circumstances for Dialogue and Negotiation of Nuclear Issue

Although the two countries share the common policy stance on pursuing sanctions and dialogue in parallel, the sanctions and pressure phase with the absence of dialogue still remains. In the end, the most important challenge would be to enter the first stage - creating the circumstances for dialogue and negotiation on freezing

the North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles. If the suspension of nuclear and missile tests was the minimum threshold shared by South Korea and the US for the opening of dialogue and negotiations, there should be measures to induce North Korea into that doorstep. The main purpose of North Korea's nuclear and missile development is to guarantee the integrity of the regime so measures are needed to stop its nuclear and missile tests and induce Pyongyang to engage in a dialogue. In this regard, the 4-No principle, a proactive policy toward North Korea, declared and agreed upon by both Seoul and Washington, can positively contribute to creating the environment for a nuclear talks with Pyongyang. However, it is unclear whether the North could end its nuclear and missile ambitions without specific security incentives guaranteed.

One can also refer to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. The important motive for the Soviet Union to deploy nuclear warhead missiles in Cuba was a threat posed by the US to the Castro government after the invasion of the Bay of Pigs. Thus, the US pledged not to attempt the regime change and withdrew its missile base from Turkey without making it public in return for the suspension of development of Cuban missile base and its withdrawal. The lessons learned in this case are that the crisis had been resolved by providing security incentives to actions derived from the perceived security threat. In order to halt Pyongyang's nuclear and missile tests and enter into the negotiation phase for nuclear freeze and verification, the two countries should go further and provide security incentives to North Korea. One option would be to consider reducing the size or frequency of the ROK-US military exercises, to which North Korea reacts very sensitively.

Reviewing the Need to Dispatch Special Envoy to North Korea

Furthermore, South Korea needs to consider dispatching a special envoy to North Korea. The role of the special envoy is to promote the creation of environment for dialogue on freezing the North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles.

Currently, South Korea, the United States, and North Korea all recognize the necessity of dialogue but the stalemate has continued due to differences in recognition of the dialogue conditions. Dispatching a special envoy can be a useful means to overcome the current deadlock. The special envoy will be able to narrow the recognition gap and facilitate the negotiation environment by presenting the proposal to North Korea, agreed upon and coordinated by South Korea and the US. In turn, the envoy could also deliver North Korea's stance to South Korea and the US in order to narrow the perception gap and facilitate the negotiation. In addition, a special envoy to North Korea can also play an important role in improving inter-Korean relations. Since the inauguration of President Moon, the government has announced its intention to improve inter-Korean relations but been faced with no response from the North. President Moon Jae-in's Berlin Declaration can be a good opportunity to improve inter-Korean relations, which lays out concrete proposals for relaxation of inter-Korean tensions and opportunities for exchange and cooperation. Efforts are needed to convey South Korea's willingness and plans through the envoy and the government should strive to induce North Korea into the dialogue phase. Overall, the dispatch of a special envoy to North Korea could be an effective way to bring about a breakthrough in discovering a linkage between improving inter-Korean relations and resolving the North Korean nuclear issue.

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