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Evaluation of North Korean and Unification Issues Laid out in Liberation Day Speech and Challenges Ahead

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President Declaring to Lead Peaceful Resolution for Korean Peninsula Issues

In August 15 Liberation Day speech, President Moon Jae-in assigned a third of his speech to North Korean and unification issues, highlighting the significance of issues related to the Korean Peninsula. His remarks came out as a result of the escalating confrontations between the US and North Korea, caused by the North's rhetoric ratcheting up on attacking Guam and the prospects of imminent crisis looming large on the Korean Peninsula. He stressed the importance of building peace the most in the speech saying that North Korea's nuclear and missile pursuits pose the biggest threats to harboring peace. North Korea's nuclear and missile development is fundamentally threatening peace on the Korean Peninsula and therefore, should rightly be addressed. If a war or other form of armed conflicts occurred to solve the North's nuclear and missile issue, it will strip the Korean Peninsula of peace and then resolving the issue itself will become meaningless. That is why Pyongyang's nuclear and missile

ambitions should be addressed with a peaceful resolution.

One should pay attention to a part of the speech where the president iterated that he will do whatever it takes to avoid a war on the Korean Peninsula under any circumstances. He went on to say that the Republic of Korea (ROK) is the only one who can call the shots on military actions in the peninsula and that without its consent, no other nation can take such actions. The US and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) have exchanged dangerous rhetorics threatening to wage a war in August when tensions on the Korean Peninsula have been ratcheting up, followed by two North Korea's Hwasong-14 launches in July. If a war broke out on the peninsula, it will annihilate South Korea with the astronomical costs incurred and casualty adding up beyond our comprehension. That is why President Moon emphasized in his remarks that only South Korea can take military actions on the peninsula - a formal message sent not only to North Korea but also to the US.

Maintaining Two-track : Denuclearization and Inter-Korean Relations

The two main pillars of North Korean policy of the Moon Jae-in government are denuclearization and inter-Korean relations. The Moon administration maintains that it will put a break on nuclear-armed North Korea and ultimately achieve denuclearization. It has also proposed a comprehensive initiative of achieving denuclearization and establishing the peace regime on the Korean Peninsula at the same time. Mr. Moon presented the first step toward denuclearization in his speech - a freezing of nuclear developments. The most urgent task to address at the current phase is to avoid the worsening of the status quo and find an opportunity for negotiation with the North. And to that end, a nuclear freeze could be a good starting point. It is important to remember, however, that under any circumstances, the exit should be a complete denuclearization of North Korea. And one should be wary of the possibility where the ultimate goal becomes distanced or less emphasized.

Strategic goals for peninsular issues vary from Korea to its neighbors. The US and China can easily deliver their goals by stably maintaining issues of the Korean

Peninsula, including denuclearization. South Korea, however, is in a different situation since its national goal is to go beyond the denuclearization, establish the permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, and ultimately materialize a mid-term roadmap for unification. That is why the ROK cannot afford to give up on inter-Korean relations in the midst of challenging situations. President Moon suggested that the economic cooperation between the South and the North, specified in the government's New Korean Peninsula Economic Map, will allow seeking a co-existence between the two Koreas. His repeated call for the reunion of separated families and the North's participation in the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang is a reflection of his willingness that the current government will resolve the urgent issues through a consultation on the humanitarian front and non-political sectors and create an inter-Korean communications channel. Normalizing inter-Korean talks in the short-term is not an easy task given the prolonged stalemate in inter-Korean relations and the seriousness of potential nuclear crisis. And with all factors considered, soft issues, including humanitarian issues and sports exchanges, give us a room for flexibility in building a channel between the South and the North.

South Korea in The Driving Seat: Challenges Ahead

North Korea and its neighbors all have different interests at stake on peninsular issues. And among them, South Korea is the only country that pursues both denuclearization and unification. It will also be the most affected from the North's nuclear attack and be damaged the most upon armed conflicts on the Korean Peninsula, which makes the case for why South Korea should be at the driving seat in building inter-Korean relations. However, South Korea's role is being reduced and limited as the confrontational structure has formed between the US and North Korea in the escalating phase of the North Korean nuclear issue. The ramifications of nuclear issues, including China's opposition to the THAAD deployment, have spread into the political, economic, and social sectors in Korea.

Currently South Korea can be analogous to be in a situation where it is sitting

behind the wheel but a car is not moving. The car, under this situation, can be compared to North Korea, the US, and China. The problem is that North Korea and neighboring countries are not cooperating enough as South Korea wants them to be. The rationale that South Korea makes for its neighbors, albeit normative and justifiable, resonated with them only half-heartedly because its leverage is not strong enough to actually put pressure on major stake-holders regarding North Korean nuclear issue.

While South Korea should make all-out-efforts for a peaceful resolution on nuclear issues, it is important to recognize that there are no perfect means to block North Korea's nuclear weapons, once they are deployed. South Korea's three layer defense system, consisting of kill chain, KAMD, and KMFR, will not completely defend the South from a nuclear attack of its northern neighbor. A nuclear-mounted submarine is also years away from the complete deployment. And relying on the tactical nuclear deployment and the nuclear extended deterrence of an ally for our national security is not a perfect solution either given its complete dependency. That leaves South Korea with no option but to opt for a complete denuclearization.

The ROK should secure a creative means to make neighboring countries, including North Korea, understand South Korea's position at a time when the North Korean nuclear issue has reached a critical point. While making the utmost efforts for the denuclearization, it is also necessary to formulate a preparation-scenario in case North Korea crosses a redline by actually deploying nuclear weapons. Nuclear-armed North Korea, under any circumstances, should not be condoned and the denuclearization should be pursued with peaceful means. President Moon's strong will in pursuit of peaceful resolution was well-reflected in his commemorative speech delivered on Liberation Day. The remaining challenge facing the ROK is to make efforts and have the willingness to drive the peninsular issue into a direction that matches our national goal. ©KINU 2017

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