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Beyond Olympic Winter Games 2018 :Toward Preparatory 4-Party Meeting in PyeongChang

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The level of consensus reached at the high-level meeting, chaired by the Minister of Unification on January 9, turned out to be very high despite over two years of severed inter-Korean dialogue. However, there are still remaining issues to be addressed when looking deeper into the agreement. The following remaining tasks were analyzed based on the implementation measures of the agreement announced in a joint press release.

First, the South and the North are off to a good start on implementing the first provision of the agreement regarding North Korea's participation in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics. However, there exists a burden of promptly conducting a working-level meeting for the participation of North Korean delegation. In 2002 Busan Asian Games, in which a delegation of 650 members including North Korean athletes and a cheering squad participated, working-level arrangements on transportation, travel routes, joint entrance, and a hoisting of flag were all agreed upon between the two sides one month prior to the opening ceremony. However, this time

South and North Korea, followed by the high-level dialogue, began working-level talks on PyeongChang Olympics in January 17, only 20 days before the opening of the Olympics. And the three-party working-level talks among the International Olympic Committee (IOC), South Korea, and North Korea is scheduled to be held at Lausanne, Switzerland on January 20. We are racing against time given the mounting issues that need to be sorted out, such as the formation of a single women's ice hockey team, travel route of South and North Korean teams, expenses, joint entrance, and a method for raising the flag.

The holding of military talks and the active promotion of exchange and cooperation described in the second provision of the joint press release are analyzed to be one of the greatest achievements of the inter-Korean high-level dialogue. This is because such agreements have provided a sound foundation for simultaneously realizing two goals among the three goals laid out in Korean Peninsula Policy set by the Moon Jae-in government: 1) resolving the North Korean nuclear issue and establishing permanent peace; and 2) achieving sustainable inter-Korean relations. Political and military agendas, such as denuclearization, peace regime on the Korean peninsula, and ROK-US joint military exercise, are expected to be dealt with through the implementation process of second provision of the agreement.

What is at stake here is that South and North Korea are highly likely to make conflicting claims over a cause of military tensions that were mentioned in the joint agreement. The South is expected to point out North Korea's nuclear missile provocation as the cause of military tensions while the North would cite the ROK-US joint military drill and the US strategic asset deployment as the cause for tensions. In addition, the DPRK is very likely to demand that Seoul's anti-Pyongyang messages broadcast through loudspeakers be suspended in the process of military talks to alleviate military tensions.

The third provision of the joint agreement- the holding of inter-Korean high-level talks and working-level meetings in various fields - should be regarded highly given that it could lead to the overall improvement of inter-Korean relations. During this high-level dialogue, the North did not accept the South's proposal of

holding a reunion event of families separated by the Korean War and the Red Cross talks. However, the ROK can once again request the holding of Red Cross meeting, citing two quotes as a rationale for its demand: 1) “the two sides will activate contact, come-and-go, and exchange and cooperation in various fields” as specified in the second provision of the agreement; and 2) “the two sides will hold talks in various areas” as stated in the third provision.

Thanks to the agreement reached in inter-Korean high-level talks held on January 9, 2018, North Korea’s participation in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics was technically agreed upon when viewing in light of a large frame. There are, however, two hoops to jump through to use the resumption of inter-Korean dialogue as a bridge to hold the DPRK-US dialogue and ultimately induce North Korea into the framework of denuclearization negotiation. The first expected hoop is North Korea’s potential backlash against the possible resumption of ROK-US joint military exercise that can be discussed around mid-March after the PyeongChang Winter Olympics and Paralympics are over. North Korea could denounce the joint military drill as a violation of “joint efforts to ease military tensions” agreed upon as specified in the second provision of the agreement. In the New Year’s speech, Kim Jong-un already demanded that South Korea and the US stop the military exercises in preparation for nuclear war and the deployment of US strategic assets.

A White House statement said that the reason behind the delay of ROK-US military exercises is simply to “deconflict the Olympics and the military exercises.” Although the UN adopted the Olympic Truce resolution urging all its member states to suspend the hostility during the Olympic period, it is only set to expire on March 25. Therefore, it will be difficult to keep the conciliatory mood alive on the Korean Peninsula after the Olympics without first addressing the issue of ROK-US joint military drill.

The second hoop is the North’s possible overture to the South regarding the 70th anniversary of the Kim regime scheduled on September 9. Kim Jong-un already hinted through the New Year’s speech that the North might require South Korea’s reciprocal gesture corresponding to its Olympic participation by declaring

South Korea's Pyeongchang Winter Olympics and the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the North Korean regime as 'national events.' And the annual joint exercises, Ulchi-Freedom Guardian(UFG), are scheduled to be held in August before the 70th anniversary of the regime foundation on September 9, which could once again escalate tensions between South Korea-North Korea and the US.

South Korea should put its focus on how to utilize the atmosphere of reconciliation created from the Olympics to ensure the stable management of inter-Korean relations and the situation around the Korean Peninsula after the Winter Olympics. One way to achieve this for the South government is to host North Korean high-level delegation's meeting with President Moon Jae-in or to broker a dialogue between the North's delegation and the US presidential delegation led by Vice President Mike Pence during the Olympic period so that the reconciliation mood can lead to a broader reconciliation atmosphere of the Korean Peninsula. Depending on a situation, it is also possible to convene a four-party meeting of high-ranking officials, who are representatives of South Korea, North Korea, the US, and China's top leaders. To make such possibility a reality, President Moon Jae-in could invite delegations of North Korea, the US, and China to lay the groundwork for the four-party meeting after the Chinese and North Korean heads of delegation are confirmed.

There is no need to give too much meaning to the four-party meeting of delegations, who are likely to encounter each other in PyeongChang. At least, South Korea will need to find out if the general atmosphere is smooth enough for the resumption of talks. A meeting of any kind will be a remarkable peace event that will attract the attention from the global media. If the four-party meeting takes place, nothing is more important than gaining an unwavering support from the US and China on continuous inter-Korean dialogue and the subsequent improvement of inter-Korean relations. Given the President Trump's declaration that there will be no military action during the inter-Korean dialogue, maintaining the inter-Korean dialogue with the support of the US and China will meet the primary condition for the peaceful resolution of North Korean nuclear issue.

The ROK government will make a legitimate case both for North Korea and the US if it manages to earn the support of the US and China on inter-Korean dialogue by successfully convening the ‘PyeongChang Four-party Meeting.’ Seoul could demand that Pyongyang stop the additional nuclear testing and the launch of ballistic missiles and that the US consider changing the size of ROK-US joint military exercises and the make-up of strategic assets. Although it is not easy for North Korea and the US to come to an agreement on such a demand, it will nonetheless be a meaningful attempt to reach the consensus of four countries by specifying the condition limited only to ‘during the dialogue phase.’ This can be called ‘conditional moratorium.’ At the same time, it is possible to establish an additional ROK-US-Japan consultative group, such as the former Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group(TCOG), reflecting the importance of US-Japan relations and South Korea-Japan relations.

Moon Jae-in’s Korean Peninsula policy, kick-started by North Korea’s participation in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics, has just taken a first step toward a successful implementation but still has a long way to go. It should be noted that the key to make the most out of 1.9 inter-Korean high-level meeting results is to induce a positive change in DPRK-US relations through the effective management of inter-Korean relations and ROK-US relations. ©KINU 2018

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