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Assessment of ROK-U.S. Summit and Challenges Ahead for Denuclearization and the Establishment of a Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula

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In a recent summit with the U.S. President Donald Trump in Washington D.C., President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea (ROK) successfully restored the momentum of the DPRK-U.S. dialogue after a no deal in the Hanoi summit. If resumed, the North Korea-U.S. talks are likely to go through a rocky road to bring about substantial outcomes as President Trump continues to take a firm stance on a “big deal,” which is a major reason behind the failed agreement in Hanoi. To bridge the gap and facilitate an agreement between Pyongyang and Washington, Seoul now has a bigger role to play. To that end, the ROK government could offer a more comprehensive version of the “big deal” that encompasses both denuclearization and the safety guarantee of the North Korean regime. The ROK also needs to remind the two parties of a possibility that the current confrontational posture, if continued, may end up wasting a valuable opportunity for promoting peace on the Korean Peninsula.

The 2nd DPRK-U.S. summit in Hanoi on February 28, 2019 failed to produce tangible outcomes and the talks between Pyongyang and Washington have since been at an impasse. In an attempt to find a

breakthrough, President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea (ROK) met with U.S. President Donald Trump in Washington last week. The main goals of this summit were to rekindle the weakened DPRK-U.S. dialogue and to gain the momentum for future negotiations necessary to make real progress on pursuing denuclearization and establishing a peace regime on the peninsula. In this regard, the Moon-Trump summit last week can be assessed as a success to some extent, given that President Trump expressed his willingness to engage in a third summit with his North Korean counterpart. Trump, however, stood firm on his proposal known as a “big deal” as revealed in Hanoi stressing that his goal is a complete dismantlement of nuclear weapons in North Korea. It indicates that the DPRK-U.S. dialogue, even if continued, will have to go through a rocky path with a slim chance of bringing about feasible progress. It also suggests that Seoul’s role, in turn, becomes ever more important.

U.S. Reaffirmation on Its Willingness to Continue Dialogue with North Korea

It is not the first time President Moon Jae-in attempted to find a breakthrough through a summit meeting whenever Pyongyang-Washington relations worsened and tensions rose on the Korean Peninsula. At the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in early 2018, President Moon sent a message of peace to the world along with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. It had provided an opportunity for ending the spiral of extreme confrontation and conflict between North Korea and the U.S. and making a turning point for their dialogue. Similarly, by holding inter-Korean summits, President Moon met with Chairman Kim in person when the North Korea-U.S. talks were locked in a stalemate in May and July 2018. A series of inter-Korean summits had reaffirmed North Korea’s willingness to give up nuclear arsenal and kept the negotiation process going. The Moon-Trump summit last week, too, was indicative of the ROK President’s decisive action to break through a negotiation stalemate following the failed agreement at the Hanoi summit.

A major achievement of the Moon-Trump summit in Washington came from the opening remarks, when President Trump said that he was willing to discuss holding future summits with Chairman Kim Jong Un. Those remarks can be

interpreted as a reaffirmation of Washington's positive stance on future negotiations with Pyongyang after Hanoi, effectively sending a message of talks to North Korea. President Trump also emphasized his unwavering good relations with Chairman Kim. It was a clear expression of America's will to work on denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime on the peninsula through top-down style negotiations.

As if responding to the U.S. message, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un stated during the 2nd day meeting of the Supreme People's Assembly that if the U.S. makes the first move for the 3rd North-U.S. summit, he intends to meet with the U.S. After Hanoi, Pyongyang's moves have cast a shadow on the prospect of DPRK-U.S. dialogue. North Korea was neither answering South Korea's request for inter-Korean summit nor that of America for a working-level dialogue. Shortly before the ROK-U.S. summit in Washington, Kim also said "we should strike a severe blow to hostile elements that emphasize sanctions." Given the current situation it is notable that Kim expressed his will to continue the momentum of a summit. It brings hope that the North-U.S. bilateral relations, once hit rock bottom, are now rebounding.

Notably Moon and Trump reaffirmed that they will maintain the top-down approach in addressing Korean Peninsula issues. After the Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi, some blamed an excessive dependence on the top-down approach and disregard for a working-level dialogue as one cause leading to the breakdown of the summit. This criticism, however, should not be viewed as that such an approach must be abandoned altogether. In fact, the determination of the two leaders is required to reach an agreement and close the stark gap in the positions of North Korea and the U.S. as revealed in Hanoi. To that end, the importance of the top-down approach has grown even larger. The reaffirmation of maintaining that approach, therefore, can be deemed one of the achievements from the Moon-Trump summit.

Another significance of the ROK-U.S. summit last week lies in its proper timing. Shortly after the Hanoi summit, President Trump asked President Moon to help him find out what Chairman Kim really wanted. South Korean President tried to hold an inter-Korean summit only to receive no answer from Pyongyang. Instead of waiting for Kim's answer, Moon aptly turned to the South Korea-U.S. summit

and earned a positive response on resuming DPRK-U.S. dialogue from his American counterpart. It can be regarded as a diplomatic success that has reignited the momentum for dialogue before things go further downhill.

Close Consultation, But Specific Negotiation Plans Later

In the ROK-U.S. summit last week, President Trump announced that the “big deal” remains to be his goal that encompasses a total dismantlement of all nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) from North Korea. Before the Hanoi summit, many experts believed that there either could be a small deal, the dismantlement of Yongbyon nuclear facilities in exchange for the end-of-war declaration, or a big deal, Yongbyon and “plus alpha” (other nuclear-related programs) in return for the lifting or relaxing of sanctions. As the summit progressed, however, the actual concept of a small and big deal turned out to be totally different from the original expectations. The small deal, demanded by North Korea, is a gradual approach that starts with the Yongbyon facilities’ dismantlement in exchange for the partial lifting of sanctions. The U.S.-proposed big deal, on the other hand, means a complete dismantlement of all WMDs-included arsenal owned by Pyongyang, let alone its nuclear weapons. Those differences had eventually led to a disagreement in Hanoi. In addition, even after the summit meeting with Kim Jong Un in Vietnam, the Trump administration still maintains the view that keeping the reins of economic sanctions tight is the best way to induce denuclearization of the DPRK. The U.S. government, in particular, made clear its lack of interest in granting sanctions relief for the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Kumgang tourism, saying that the right time is yet to come.

President Moon at the ROK-U.S. summit last week affirmed Washington’s strong will and adherence to the big deal proposal and economic sanctions. It is a clear indication of a long road ahead of reaching an agreement even if the DPRK-U.S. dialogue resumes. To make progress in denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, it is necessary for Pyongyang and Washington to close the gap in their positions and find the common

ground.

Challenges Ahead: Balance of Interests between the DPRK and the U.S.

The unsatisfactory results of the Hanoi summit have made South Korea's role all the more important in the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. The Moon-Trump summit last week was serving as a first test bed for Seoul to take up such a role and rise up to the challenges. The ROK government is now allegedly planning an inter-Korean summit. President Trump said to President Moon that he wants to be informed of Pyongyang's position as early as possible through such an occasion.

In future inter-Korean talks, Seoul will relay Washington's messages to Pyongyang. With the Trump administration's strong adherence to the big deal confirmed, the ROK government can play a role to talk North Korea into taking a more future-oriented attitude and accepting denuclearization measures closer to the U.S.-proposed big deal. This is obviously a daunting task for North Korea. At the moment, the DPRK equates a comprehensive nuclear deal and the declaration of arsenals with being disarmed. Further, Kim recently condemned the ROK in the Supreme People's Assembly, saying that it must stop "pretending to be a nosy mediator and facilitator." This remark implies negative prospects for South Korea's position to be narrowed in dealing not only with the U.S. but also the North.

From a broader perspective, however, a possible breakthrough may be found if Seoul contemplates not just what Washington demands but also what the U.S. can offer to the DPRK. At the end of his "mediator" remarks, Chairman Kim stressed that the ROK government must "act as a party that safeguards the interests of Korean people of the same root." His choice of words may have constituted a breach of diplomatic etiquette. Yet, the underlying message may be a request to South Korea that it make efforts to draw fair results both for the U.S. and the DPRK instead of simply advocating America's position. Currently, the Trump administration appears to consider the lifting of economic sanctions and support for economic development as corresponding measures to the big deal. It remains skeptical, however, whether

Pyeongyang will be convinced that economic compensations are valuable enough to dismantle and dispose all of its nuclear and other weapons including WMDs. North Korea claims that nuclear arms are a means of self-defense to address the threat posed against its regime. A number of experts agree with this view in broad terms. According to this perspective, the negotiation framework proposed by the U.S. appears to have an unbalanced distribution structure of interests between the two parties. If so, the ROK needs to work on striking a balance in the distribution structure of interests and overcome the stalemate.

One of ways to achieve a balance of interests between Pyeongyang and Washington is to reduce the U.S. side's demand. The latest summit, however, proved that this approach is all but impossible. In large part driven by its distrust of North Korea, the U.S. government is determined to pursue a comprehensive big deal, refusing a gradual approach. Washington considers a step-by-step approach to be a mere repetition of the old vicious cycle: North Korea's partial denuclearization efforts in exchange for corresponding measures and ultimately, the return to the nuclear crisis. In the process the DPRK has continuously strengthened its nuclear capabilities and is now a de facto nuclear state. This explains why the U.S. resolves not to repeat the same mistakes of the past and achieve irreversible denuclearization through the big deal by making the North put all nuclear arms and other WMDs on the table. Washington also believes that keeping tough economic sanctions is an important means to prevent North Korea from further developing nuclear and WMD capabilities. In this context, it might be unfair to diminish as unreasonable obsession the U.S.'s suspicion over the Kim regime and its strong determination for the big deal.

More feasible alternative is to offer North Korea substantial and comprehensive corresponding measures that match the level of the big deal. If nuclear weapons are a means of self-defense to protect the regime, one way to convince North Korea of complete denuclearization is to eliminate the effective value of nuclear arms—guaranteeing the regime's safety. After the Hanoi summit ended without an agreement, Pyeongyang made it clear that in negotiating the corresponding measures for denuclearization, the relaxation of sanctions is not

among its top priorities but the regime's safety guarantee is. Therefore, the ROK government could find out through various communication channels whether North Korea has an intention to agree to the complete dismantlement of its nuclear arms and other WMDs if both sanctions relaxation and the guarantee of regime safety are on the table. This approach will call for discussions on what specific measures are needed for that safety guarantee.

Another remaining challenge for Seoul is to act as a party, not a mediator, in the DPRK-U.S. talks. This is more than a response to Kim Jong Un's "mediator" remarks. In fact, similar arguments have continuously been made in America as well. Today the ROK is a stakeholder no less important than the DPRK and the U.S. in their negotiations on the denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. It is, therefore, necessary to voice Seoul's opinion and make active interventions to produce desirable outcomes rather than simply leaving those challenges to Kim and Trump or acting as a mere messenger between the two. To that end, the three countries need to reset the structure of negotiations and form a trilateral dialogue, instead of having three consecutive bilateral summits (DPRK-U.S., ROK-U.S. and South-North Korea). The trilateral approach has its merits such as saving the costs for delivering messages from consecutive bilateral talks and minimizing the likelihood of misunderstanding one another's true intention.

Time Is on No One's Side

In future DPRK-U.S. negotiations, the ROK government needs to make both parties be aware that time is on no one's side. Under the current circumstances, time is by no means on Pyongyang's side. Sanctions have blocked tight the Kim regime's major export routes—a major source of foreign currency. North Korea appears to weather through foreign currency shortages by exhausting its foreign reserves that have accumulated thus far. If this situation continues, the country is likely to face a serious economic crisis. Such a crisis is likely to pose a political burden to the supreme leader who declared his commitment of economic development. Based on this analysis, Trump argued that the DPRK will find itself

at a critical crossroads within a year.

Time is neither on America's side, however. There is a possibility that Pyongyang would voluntarily give up its nuclear arsenal and other WMDs in an attempt to get out of the economic crisis if the current level of sanctions continue to be in place for an extended period. Unfortunately, however, this scenario entails a risk that should not be overlooked. Kim, if the harsh sanctions continue, may turn a blind eye to the economy and people's livelihood and choose to cling to nuclear weapons and the regime's security. Sanctions have made numerous material resources scarcer than before. The Kim regime may take advantage of these shortages to retain the loyalty of the key elites, which is crucial to keep its grip on power. If so, it would be ordinary citizens who primarily have to bear the damage from sanctions. Some of them may end up engaging in anti-government activities, posing a threat to the regime. The nature of non-democratic North Korean regime, however, makes it possible to prevent organized anti-government movements from evolving into a real threat. Even when the movement of that kind does emerge, with its nuclear-armed formidable military power, Pyongyang may be able to crack dissidents down with little difficulty while successfully blocking external interventions by the U.S. or the ROK. In his New Year's speech this January, Kim Jong Un stated that he would pursue "a new path" if his negotiations with the U.S. make little progress. While there are different interpretations of what this means, one can predict that an inclination for further isolation and dictatorship is on Kim's mind.

Today's negotiation strategies of the DPRK and the U.S. toward each other are confrontational and conservative in nature. Such an approach runs the risk of wasting a valuable opportunity for denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. President Moon, therefore, needs to raise an awareness through inter-Korean and ROK-U.S. summits that the continuum of this confrontational posture poses a danger of damaging both parties. Based on that understanding, Pyongyang and Washington should tone down the hawkish attitudes toward each other and adopt a more open approach to the bilateral talks. ©KINU 2019



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