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Causes behind the Breakdown of North Korea-U.S. Working-level Talks in Stockholm and North Korea's Strategy

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North Korea-U.S. working-level talks broke down after having resumed for the first time in 99 days since the meeting last July in Panmunjeom between leaders of the North and the U.S. The two sides' immediate responses after the talks completely differed. The chief North Korean negotiator stated that it was extremely unpleasant because the U.S. came to the negotiating table 'empty-handed.' On the other hand, the U.S. State Department Spokesperson said that the U.S. brought 'creative ideas.' In particular, North Korea expressed a big 'disappointment' after it claimed there was a 'break-down' in talks and refused to set a date for the next meeting.

Why did North Korea feel such a deep disappointment? A key to piece together the puzzle is the U.S.'s 'creative proposals.' North Korea maintains that Washington did not prepare anything because it completely ignored the basic calculus of the exchange framework of 'denuclearization vs. security guarantee' and it continued to stick to the age-old attitude of the 'denuclearization-first approach.' What the U.S. meant by 'creative' is highly likely to involve detailed items (plans) associated with economic prosperity and a bright future, lacking the security guarantee measures. That is why the North claimed that the U.S. came to the negotiation table 'empty-handed' even though the U.S. spent a long time explaining their 'creative ideas.' It is because Washington did not present a calculation that the North wanted. Eventually, the North Korean delegation decided to report it to the higher authority, went ahead with claiming a 'break-down' of the talks, and stressed that the 'denuclearization-first approach' will never be accepted and that practical measures for a 'security guarantee (elimination of hostile policies toward North Korea)' are the 'calculation' that they desire.

North Korea-U.S. working-level talks broke down without agreeing to set the date for the next negotiation after having resumed for the first time in 99 days since the meeting last July in Panmunjeom between leaders of the North and the U.S. The chief North Korean negotiator, Kim Myong-gil, stated 15 minutes after the end of working-level negotiations that the talks have ‘broken down’ and that “it was extremely unpleasant” because the U.S. came to the negotiating table “empty-handed” without doing away with “the age-old position and attitude.” On the other hand, the U.S. State Department Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus rejected his claims by saying that the U.S. brought “creative ideas” and had “good discussions” introducing many new plans that would enable future progress. While the U.S. accepted a Swedish proposal to resume negotiations in two weeks, North Korea rejected it.

North Korea’s ‘disappointment’ seems to go way beyond a big disagreement of opinion in working-level negotiations given that it claimed there was a “break-down” in talks and refused to set a date for the next meeting. Why did North Korea feel such a deep disappointment? One can only piece together the puzzle of what might have been discussed at the working-level talks by analyzing the statements of North Korea’s chief negotiator, Kim Myong-gil, spokesperson for North Korea’s Foreign Ministry, and the spokesperson of the U.S. Department of State. The bottom line is that North Korea probably was deeply disappointed by the U.S.’s ‘creative proposals.’ North Korea’s statements and discourses show both its response to the U.S. ‘creative proposals’ and its continued negotiation strategy. This paper will look into the ‘gap’ identified between Pyongyang and Washington, contents of their correspondence, and North Korea’s negotiation strategy.

North Korea’s Rebuttal of ‘Creative Ideas’ from the U.S.

North Korea especially emphasized a ‘security guarantee’ by using ‘strong language’ in the statements of its chief negotiator, Kim Myong-gil, and Foreign Ministry spokesperson. Both statements stated that complete denuclearization is possible only when “all the obstacles that threaten our security and undermine our

development are clearly removed without any doubt,” and when there are “measures to completely eliminate such institutional hindrances once and for all that threaten our security and development.” It was expressed in a tone that is much tougher with a clearer emphasis compared to the time before the negotiations started. North Korea made it clear that its calculation refers to denuclearization in return for a security guarantee. Then the question remains as to why the North had to stress a ‘security guarantee’ in a much tougher tone immediately after the negotiation ended.

The following in Rep. Kim’s statement is worth noting: “An argument that North Korea’s rights to survival and development are guaranteed only when the North gives up nuclear deterrence in the face of the U.S.’s remaining threat is a clear error of the sequence.” Given his remarks, it can be assumed that the U.S. may have suggested providing the North with corresponding measures that guarantee the rights to its survival and development if Pyongyang takes denuclearization measures up-front. That seems highly likely to be the ‘creative ideas’ offered by the U.S. The North’s strong emphasis and use of tough language, especially when referring to a ‘security guarantee’ is in direct opposition to such ‘creative ideas.’ It is possible that Washington’s ‘creative ideas’ may focus on ‘commitments’ of economic support, including prosperity and economic development, as opposed to a ‘security guarantee.’

In fact, it is highly likely that the U.S.’s suggestion may not have deviated that much from John Bolton’s ‘denuclearization-first approach’ and the existing U.S. suggestions of economic prosperity and a bright future. What the U.S. meant by ‘creative’ is highly likely to involve detailed items (plans) associated with economic prosperity and a bright future. The U.S. State Department Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus called it a “new plan.” The U.S version of the plan could be more like a “blueprint” or “commitment” as opposed to “detailed measures that could be exchanged immediately.” In terms of denuclearization, it is possible that the U.S. may have suggested the comprehensive denuclearization agreement of the early phase and a freeze on nuclear and missile (including ICBM·IRBM) facilities and their production. In fact, it is not that different from what was presented in Hanoi. North Korea criticized the U.S. in the following: “The U.S. clung to its existing position

with an outdated transcript and brought ambiguous claims without any calculation or guarantee.” If what the U.S. offered did not include measures for a ‘security guarantee,’ they could have been viewed as ambiguous claims in the eyes of the North in that they lacked substantial “security measures.” North Korea maintains that Washington did not prepare anything because it completely ignored the basic calculus of the exchange framework of ‘denuclearization vs. security guarantee’ and it continued to stick to the age-old attitude of the “denuclearization-first approach.” That is why the North claimed that the U.S. came to the negotiation table ‘empty-handed’ even though the U.S. spent a long time explaining their ‘creative ideas.’ It is because Washington did not present a calculation that the North wanted. Eventually, the North Korean delegation decided to report it to the higher authority, went ahead with claiming a ‘break-down’ of the talks, and stressed that the ‘denuclearization-first approach’ will never be accepted and that practical measures for a ‘security guarantee (elimination of hostile policies toward North Korea)’ are the ‘calculation’ that they desire.

The statement released by the Foreign Ministry the next day used the following tough language: “North Korea does not have the will to engage in as disgusting negotiations as this time unless there is an actual measure to completely and irreversibly withdraw this hostile policy towards the DPRK, which threatens the security of our nation and hinders our people’s rights to survival and development.” The word ‘disgust,’ as North Korea put it, indicates their intense anger and strong opposition. Their word choice offers a hint that creative ideas offered by the U.S. in the negotiation process were a mere ‘plan’ (promise) item, not corresponding measures that will resolve their concerns on the security guarantee. Consistency on this issue is found in many parts of the statements and discourses released by the North.

Demands for Trust-building at the Starting Line

North Korea has emphasized a negotiation framework and structure toward the U.S. attitude through various statements and discourses. First, those actions are

a reminder of a ‘starting line’ in the U.S.–North Korea negotiation. In other words, North Korea reminded the U.S. of the promises that should have been made at the ‘stage of trust-building’ and demanded that the starting line be readjusted. Pyongyang has consistently divided the DPRK–U.S. negotiation process into a ‘stage of trust-building’ and a ‘denuclearization stage’ ever since the Singapore summit on June 12, 2018. The stage of trust-building is when a ‘good-will measure’ is implemented as promised both by North Korea and the U.S. In fact, the North already took good-will measures of halting nuclear and missile activities and dismantling a nuclear test site in the Northern part of the country. In line with the joint statement of the Singapore summit, North Korea promised to send back the remains of American soldiers and kept that promise as a good-will gesture. North Korea claimed that at the Singapore summit, President Trump expressed his intent to take corresponding measures, such as suspending the ROK–U.S. joint military exercise, promptly declaring the end of the war, and lifting sanctions in line with the improvement of relations.

North Korea maintained that contrary to what was expressed in Singapore, the U.S. threatened North Korea’s rights to survival and development by resuming the ROK–U.S. joint military drills, upping the bar higher for the end-of-the war declaration, continuing the deployment of strategic assets and acquisition of weapons, and imposing 15 additional sanctions since the Singapore summit. After all this, the U.S. came up with ‘creative ideas’ that did not contain the security guarantee measures. The U.S. not implementing trust-building measures as promised is not a fair calculation in the eyes of the DPRK. The North believed that once a starting line was wrongfully drawn, the denuclearization talks would begin within an unfair framework. On the other hand, the U.S. viewed that trust can be built by confirming detailed denuclearization measures as opposed to a corresponding ‘trust-building measure’ or ‘security guarantee.’ North Korea reaffirmed its own definition of a starting line by declaring a break-down in the negotiation that only a ‘well-meaning response’ in the form of trust-building measures can enable discussing the next-phase in denuclearization measures.

An Exchange Framework based on Equivalence and Mutual Obligations

It is possible that North Korea took this negotiation as an opportunity to see if the U.S. properly recognizes the so-called ‘new calculation’ framework of phased progress and an exchange structure based on equivalence and fairness and prepared corresponding measures accordingly. North Korea demanded that the U.S. implement trust-building measures, affirm the comprehensive implementation of a security guarantee (withdrawal of its hostile policy toward North Korea), and phased exchange. On the contrary, the U.S. focused on presenting additional items that fall into four provisions of the joint statement of the Singapore summit. It is also possible that the U.S. may have demanded an ‘intense discussion’ on denuclearization issues. The North likely viewed the U.S.’s ‘creative ideas’ to not be within the fair framework of the exchange structure but to be in line with the existing denuclearization-first demands, simply adding a few items as rewards.

The essence of North Korea’s ‘new calculation’ is ‘fairness’ and ‘equivalence.’ North Korea thinks that the U.S. has thus far approached the DPRK-U.S. negotiation with an ‘unfair’ viewpoint of North Korea’s denuclearization ‘obligations’ vs. the U.S.’s corresponding ‘rewards.’ Therefore, what is at the core of the ‘new calculation’ is to make a fair negotiation framework, under which both sides exchange only ‘obligations.’ The North claimed that there is no such thing as a unilateral ‘reward,’ and that there is only an exchange of a comprehensive denuclearization vs. comprehensive security guarantee. The DPRK maintained that the security guarantee was not a reward. North Korea’s demands for the lifting of sanctions at the Hanoi summit consequently reinforced the perception that the desire to lift sanctions is their weakness and therefore could be leveraged as rewards. North Korea has attempted to reshape such a perception. In the end, the North’s declaration of a ‘break-down’ in talks was intended to emphasize the importance of an approach based on mutual obligations and equivalence as opposed to a rewards-centered approach, such as economic assistance.

North Korea's Criticism of U.S. Domestic Politics and Party Interests

North Korea blamed U.S. domestic politics as a reason for its “age-old position and attitude,” “vague claim,” “outdated transcript,” “coming to talks empty-handed,” and “sticking to the existing position.” Why make such remarks? North Korea has its suspicion that the creative ideas offered by the U.S. were made in reflection of the atmosphere of Washington, the political situation engulfing President Trump at home. In other words, the North raised its doubts that the U.S. acted out of the necessity to display ‘continuous and intense negotiation,’ and that the U.S. may have presented such ‘vague’ plans of promising economic assistance and development after the denuclearization implementation to prevent the administration from political attacks while being conscious of its domestic political crisis and party interests. In fact, North Korea recognized the ‘political situation,’ including Washington’s opposition to the lifting of sanctions and the realistic difficulties in providing the security guarantee. They are wary of repeating the same traumatic events that took place at the Hanoi summit.

What the Security Guarantee Mean for North Korea: Multi-layered Implications

What North Korea meant by ‘safety of nation,’ ‘security guarantee,’ and ‘institutional safety’ is the elimination or withdrawal of all the hostile acts that seek to threaten and overthrow its institutions. This is summed up as the so-called ‘withdrawal of the hostile policy towards North Korea.’ North Korea’s military demands include suspending aggressive ROK-U.S. joint military exercises, halting the deployment of strategic assets on the Korean Peninsula, stopping the adoption, importing, and acquisition of strategic weapons, changing the U.S. nuclear policy intended to categorize North Korea as a subject for preemptive nuclear attacks. Their political and diplomatic demands encompass normalizing relations, pulling North Korea out from the list of state-sponsors of terrorism, concluding a peace agreement, all of which is about the recognition of its regime. Their economic demand is

practically a lifting of economic sanctions. In fact, the security guarantee contains all the core elements of sustaining the North Korean regime.

The ‘security guarantee’ is the core leverage in the North–U.S. negotiations. First, the ‘security guarantee’ will enable North Korea’s phased approach determining the speed of denuclearization. However, the security guarantee is something that the U.S. would find hard to accept at once and that will take years to fulfill. North Korea wanted to follow an action–for–action principle, which eventually has the inherent meaning of North Korea’s phased approach that would enable adjusting the speed of denuclearization. Second, the ‘security guarantee’ contains the meaning of arguing for North Korea’s desired scope of denuclearization. Pyongyang recently stated that it would never accept the U.S. demands of a freeze and dismantlement of WMD, which is essentially a demand for ‘disarmament.’ Instead, it stressed the importance of resolving the ‘security instability’ that threatens both sides (i.e. with nuclear arsenal) and expressed its will to continue developing state-of-the art weapons for its self–defense capability, such as test–launching short–range missiles and SLBM. At the end, the ‘security guarantee’ card is a means to respond to the denuclearization demands involving WMD.

Lastly, the ‘security guarantee’ is a useful card in the negotiation strategy because it utilizes the structure of the Northeast Asian arms race. There has been growing North Korean coverage of the structure of the arms race in Northeast Asia with a fierce criticism of the U.S.’s withdrawal from the Intermediate–Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), the test–launch of its intermediate–range cruise missiles, and the acquisition of weapons by Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. Those reports were intended as a reminder of the geopolitical landscape that threatens regional peace and safety. North Korea effectively utilizes this geopolitical aspect to justify and rationalize its security guarantee demands by pointing out that their own security is in peril.

Our Understanding on the Exchange Structure and Security Guarantee

North Korea’s hardline decision to go ahead with the ‘break–down’ of talks

could be interpreted as a planned move to resolve the disgrace (trauma) caused at Hanoi and show their unshakable will by upping the bar on negotiations higher in the early phase and presenting the maximalist demands. It could be read in line of their tactics to pass the buck to the U.S. and pressure it with the end-of-the-year deadline, thereby corning the Trump negotiation camp and securing the advantageous position of negotiations. However, the consistent patterns found in North Korea's discourses and statements are their disappointment of the U.S. 'creative ideas' and frustration that the U.S. did not reflect North Korea's position at all since the Panmunjeom meeting on June 30.

North Korea let the U.S. know that time was up for resuming the dialogue by releasing a series of discourses and statements, including Chairman Kim Jong Un's speech at the Supreme People's Assembly, statements by the vice minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Choi Sun Hee, chief North Korean negotiator Kim Myong Gil, the Foreign Ministry advisor Kim Kye Gwan, and its ambassador to the United Nations Kim Song. By doing so, the North gave a 'hint' of what they wanted the U.S. to prepare for at least one to five months in advance. In the process, words emerged from the U.S. side, such as 'flexible approach' (Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun), 'new method' (President Trump), and 'creative solution' (Secretary of the State Mike Pompeo). North Korea let the U.S. know in advance that it was preparing the resumption of working-level talks and that the prerequisite for denuclearization is the elimination of obstacles that hinder their 'institutional safety' and 'development.' Pyongyang also emphasized that enough time has been given to the U.S. to prepare for talks. Although the North's 'security guarantee' could be viewed as a means to impose pressure in terms of their negotiation strategy, the U.S. at least should have come to the table with a resolution plan or rationale that responds to North Korea's claim for a security guarantee and their corresponding measures. It is necessary for the U.S. to reflect on how much of an understanding it had of North Korea's demands for a 'security guarantee' at the negotiating table. It must also appreciate the 'security guarantee' desired by the North to the extent that we want denuclearization. Preparing for their 'security guarantee' demands as thoroughly and abundantly as possible in crafting negotiation tactics will determine



the success of the North-U.S. negotiation in the long-term and eventually the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. ©KINU 2019

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