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International Discussions on North Korean Human Rights and Future Tasks

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Every year the international community's concerns over North Korea's human rights issues have been expressed through various resolutions and reports from multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and individual states. The discussions of the international community revolved around the severity of the human rights conditions in North Korea and the possibility of improvement. The Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the U.S. Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, both published in March 2020, are representative pieces of the international community's multilateral and bilateral efforts to remedy the North Korean human rights conditions respectively. Though they vary in the emphasis they put on civil liberties and socioeconomic rights and the specifics of each right, each report very well portrays the international community's current discussions and future tasks on the North Korean human rights issues. In light of the international efforts, the South Korean government ought to support and build upon both domestic and international North Korean human rights-related infrastructures by providing precise information, especially including those on actual conditions.

The international community has long concerned over North Korea's human rights conditions. It has not only worried about the severity of the conditions but also focused on the possibilities of improvement. The international community, in general, has continued to discuss the realities of and recommendations for the improvement of North Korea's human rights conditions through various types of resolutions and reports coming from multilateral institutions centering around the UN and from other individual states. The most important point, however, is to continually obtain a realistic potential and momentum for policy-tuning in order to practice the specifics of the international community's goals and induce individual states' support. In this light, this paper reviews the reports released by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the U.S. Department of State for identifying implications.

The Report of the UN Special Rapporteur and North Korean Women's Human Rights

The 43rd UNHRC was held in the Geneva UN Headquarters from February 24 to March 20, 2020. During the Council meeting, the Special Rapporteur Tomas Ojea Quintana released the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (UN Report). The UN Report revealed the monitoring results of the North Korean human rights conditions in 2019. Special Rapporteur Quintana, appointed in 2016, pointed out that, while he has been releasing reports every year to the UNHRC, the human rights conditions under Kim Jong Un are still dire.

The UN Report begins by discussing the economic and social rights, among many types of rights, that the North Korean citizens should be able to enjoy. With the overall socioeconomic conditions decaying including the citizens' food rights, the UN Report asserts that the country does not show a sign of improvement in 2020. Also, as international sanctions prolong and the COVID-19 enforces border closures, it points out that the difficulties in people's livelihood have become severe and the need for humanitarian aid relief is mounting. Then, the UN Report specifies basic rights, problems of abductions and disappearances, and forced repatriations.

Surprisingly, the UN Report expresses concerns over South Korea's repatriation of the two North Korean crewmen who arrived in South Korea via seas on November 2019. On this point, it primarily focuses on North Korea's responsibilities on human rights abuses while simultaneously mentioning the specific recommendations on the responsibilities of the international community and surrounding states such as China. In other words, it emphasizes that, while the primary responsibility of North Korean human rights abuses lies in North Korea's hands, the international community and surrounding countries, especially South Korea, also have important responsibilities and roles in improving the situation of North Korean human rights.

Meanwhile, this year's UN Report expresses detailed concerns over the human rights conditions of women in North Korea. Especially, the report deals with broad range of issues regarding North Korean women such as political participation, education, labor, health rights, drinking water and hygiene, violence against women, trafficking and sexual exploitation, post-repatriation treatments, and problems on settling down in South Korea.

It holds significant meaning that the human rights issues of North Korean women were specifically emphasized in annually released UNHRC reports. Especially, human rights issues of North Korean women touch upon the central structure underlying North Korean human rights abuses; North Korea is a patriarchal society that has long considered women to be inferior to men, and such belief is embedded in various layers of the social structure. In fact, a major cause of human rights violations in North Korea is the lack of human rights awareness and the sociocultural convention that expansively reproduces the unawareness. The UN Report also deals with defections at the border regions with a focus on forced repatriations and the human rights abuses that women face during the process.

Considering that most North Korean defectors who reside in third countries such as China or South Korea are female, the UN Report sheds a meaningful light—one that deserves international attention—on forced repatriation not simply within the framework of illegal border crossings or economic migrations but in terms of the human rights of women, who can be seen as political, economic, social, and cultural

minorities.

U.S. Department of State's Report and North Korea's Violations of Civil Liberties

Soon after the release of UN Special Rapporteur Report, the U.S. Department of State unveiled its Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (US Report) on March 11. Compared to the UN Report, the US Report puts more emphasis on the aspect of civil liberties of North Korea's human rights abuses. In other words, it provides a comprehensive analysis of arbitrary executions, forced disappearances, torture and inhumane treatment, political prison camps, and violations of freedoms of religion and expression, among others.

The US Report provides detailed analyses of the realities of the North Korean human rights abuses vis-à-vis every section of civil liberties and expresses concern over North Korea's lack of fundamental efforts to improve its human rights conditions. It points out the impunity given to human rights violators and how far off the institutions and policies are from fundamentally improving the country's human rights conditions. The US Report asserts that, while North Korea acts more cooperatively on social issues, for instance, by participating in the UNHRC's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and adopting recommendations on women, children, and the disabled or allowing the visit of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2017, the situation on civil liberties—often involving state violations—is still dire.

The US Report mentioned, for the first time, the case of Otto Warmbier, who was detained in North Korea and was released in 2017 but died soon after returning home; it mentioned how, despite his death after the undue detainment, North Korea provided no explanations. Similar to how Japan continually raises its abductee issues to North Korea, the mentioning of Otto Warmbier in the US Report signifies the potential for this incident to influence the U.S.'s North Korea policies or the North Korea-U.S. relations in general.

Another unique feature of the US Report is that it widely cites the testimonies of North Korean defectors, reports of South Korean and American NGOs, and White

Paper on Human Rights in North Korea (KINU White Paper) published by the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU). Especially, the KINU White Paper has been broadly cited across the entire Report. From the perspective of public diplomacy with the U.S., this signals the potential for research outcomes of South Korean government-affiliated research institutes on North Korean human rights issues to effectively circulate across government, academia, and civil society in the U.S.

International Discussions on North Korean Human Rights and the Role of the South Korean Government

International discussions on North Korean human rights have been continuously unfolding with a clear goal. The strategic objectives have been to 1) look inside North Korea through international human rights standards, 2) remind the North Korean government of their responsibilities, and 3) guarantee the rights of North Korean people. In line with the objectives, various actors ought to cooperate by either devising resolutions at the UN level or raising awareness through reports published by individual states.

One driving factor of international efforts on North Korean human rights is objective analyses of North Korea's human rights conditions. In this respect, civil societies in South Korea and the U.S., along with their governments, have contributed to forming a knowledge community. Gathering precise information on North Korea by interacting and cooperating with 33,000 North Korean defectors in South Korea, generating precise analyses with the use of international standards, and expanding the analyses to actual practice are all deemed extremely difficult without government support via infrastructure, interest, and investment. This further emphasizes the urgent need for launching North Korean Human Rights Foundation, which will focus on investigating and researching North Korean human rights conditions and supporting both domestic and international North Korean human rights infrastructures.

How should the domestically accumulated knowledge and information on North Korean human rights be shared with the international community and civil

societies remains to be seen. Domestic North Korean human rights networks and infrastructures have developed considerably over the years, and international discussions on the issue have also passed its elementary stage, leading to developing precise and specific improvement plans. In this light, South Korean civil societies and its government should live up to international expectations, refining and internationalizing the initial mechanisms on North Korean human rights. Also, they should continue to encourage and support domestic infrastructures that are highly recognized and cited in the reports produced by the UN and major countries. The most important starting point for improving the North Korean human rights conditions lies on the power of information that stems from accurate evaluations of the reality.

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