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Intention behind North Korea's Recent Offensive toward South Korea and the U.S. and Ways to Resume Denuclearization Talks

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The intention behind North Korea's recent offensive toward South Korea and the U.S. can be summed up as the need to make tangible results in inter-Korean relations and to resume denuclearization negotiations. North Korea needs a breakthrough to weather through the economic crisis, and President Trump needs an achievement in denuclearization talks. Bolton's memoir proves that the major cause behind the breakdown of the DPRK-U.S. denuclearization negotiations was Bolton himself as well as the cacophony within the U.S. negotiating team. It is desirable to resume a denuclearization negotiation within this year before the U.S. presidential election. The focus should be on reaching an initial, irreversible agreement while taking into account the complexity of North Korea's denuclearization. The 'From Yongbyon' negotiation proposal could be one alternative. The ROK government, as a first party, should serve the role of initiating the peace process on the Korean Peninsula.

Offensive toward South Korea on June 2020

North Korea's offensive toward South Korea first started on June 4 with the First Vice Director of North Korea's Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party Kim Yo-jong taking an issue with the propaganda leaflets flown by some

defector groups. The offensive reached its peak on June 16 when North Korea blew up the Inter-Korean Liaison Office in Gaesong. On July 17, the General Staff Department (GSD) of the Korean People's Army (KPA) announced that it will gain the approval on additional action toward South Korea from the Workers' Party's Central Military Commission. However, on June 23, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission in North Korea, Kim Jong-un, delayed the decision at the preliminary meeting. On June 24, Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the WPK, Kim Yong-chol, released a statement making it known that the overall offensive toward South Korea came to a halt, stating "measures were taken to stop a series of on-going actions toward South Korea."

North Korea pre-announced on its June offensive toward South Korea that hostile acts toward South Korea will be taken and emphasized that those will be "the first-step action." All North Korea's military provocations had no pre-warnings thus far, including the sinking of ROKS Cheonan, the bombardment of Yeonpyeong, and the three North Korean mines (PMD series) that exploded in the South's Demilitarized Zone. North Korea cut off the inter-Korean communication channel by declaring a transition of inter-Korean relations to enemy relations. However, even during the offensive period toward South Korea, North Korea kept making demands to South Korea that the ROK show tangible action to implement the inter-Korean agreements and did not go as far as to announce a complete termination of inter-Korean relations. The essence of North Korea's southern-bound offensive, which entered its full-stage ever since the breakdown of the DPRK-U.S. summit in Hanoi, is a demand made to South Korea that it implement inter-Korean agreements and develop inter-Korean relations without paying heed to external forces. North Korea taking an issue with the ROK-U.S. working group can also be viewed along that line.

Discourse Offensive toward the U.S. on July 2020

North Korea made a transition to a discourse offensive toward the U.S. around the time of the visit of Deputy Secretary of State and Special Representative

for North Korea, Stephen E. Biegun to South Korea on July 7. On July 4, the First Vice Foreign Minister in North Korea, Choi Sun Hee, released a statement saying “There is no need to sit with the U.S.” On July 7, Kwon Jong-gun, Director-general of the North Korean Foreign Ministry’s Department of U.S. Affairs emphasized “To once again make it clear, we have no intent on sitting with Americans.” On July 10, the First Vice Director, Kim Yo-jong, said in a discourse that the North Korea-U.S. summit is of no good use to North Korea, making a skeptical projection on the possibility of holding the summit within this year.

North Korea’s July discourse toward the U.S. is not really a declaration of an end to the North Korea-U.S. denuclearization negotiation. The First Vice Foreign Minister Choi said in a discourse that “The U.S. has no determination or the will to reset the stage with us,” implicitly demanding that the U.S. change its attitude. A discourse of Director-general Kwon Jong-gun that “If the ROK is so strongly hell-bent on acting as a mediator and determined to achieve that goal, go ahead” could be interpreted as North Korea sending a message that it will watch the ROK government serving as an intermediary for negotiation resumption.

While the First Vice Director Kim Yo-jong negatively assessed the possibility of holding the DPRK-U.S. summit in her discourse, she left, at the same time, a clue that “It is my own personal opinion,” or “who knows” and emphasized the friendship that was built with President Trump. She also delivered Chairman Kim’s greetings: “I wish President Trump the best of luck in his projects.” In particular, the First Vice Director Kim Yo-jong said in the final section of the dialogue: “I got permission from comrade Chairman Kim about personally securing a DVD of the Independence Day events.” This remark can be interpreted as implying that she, if the situation requires, could be at the forefront of the denuclearization talks or serve as a special envoy to the U.S.

Causes behind the DPRK-U.S. Denuclearization Negotiation As Revealed in Bolton’s Newly Published Memoir

John Bolton’s memoir, the former National Security Advisor at the White

House, newly published on June 23, contains a variety of episodes on what happened behind the scenes in the North Korea-U.S. negotiations. What deserves attention is that the end-of-war declaration was reviewed in the Singapore summit, and that a draft agreement crafted by Special Representative for North Korea, Stephen Biegun was already prepared at the Hanoi summit. According to his book, Bolton put the brakes on the end-of-war declaration, which was positively reviewed by President Trump, by making North Korea's nuclear and missile declaration as a precondition, and he also refused Biegun's draft agreement. Considering that Bolton criticized the negotiation team at the U.S. State Department in his book, pointing out that "They just laid out Trump's pre-concessions," it is estimated that the draft agreement contains 'phased and synchronous' implementation measures that Biegun mentioned at Stanford University on January 2019.

Bolton's implementation measures suggested in his book are as follows: △ declaration of North Korea's nuclear missile first, △inclusion of all the intermediate-range ballistic missiles and chemical·biological weapons, △refusal of 'Action-for-Action' and economic rewards-first, and △the completion of denuclearization within 2 years. However, there is a slim chance that North Korea would declare nuclear inventory up-front without any corresponding measures. This is because the declaration of nuclear inventory always requires the verification and if the negotiation were to break down, North Korea would get nothing in return after revealing its nuclear inventory. It would be hard for North Korea to accept such a proposal that requires dismantling not only ICBM but also all the intermediate-range ballistic missiles when other neighboring countries have already secured ballistic missile capability. An 'Action for Action' exchange of denuclearization and corresponding measures, including economic rewards, was already put to use in past negotiations on North Korea. The major part of North Korea's nuclear program can be dismantled in a relatively short period of time. However, a 'technically-informed roadmap for North Korea's denuclearization,' written in 2018 by Dr. Siegfried S. Hecker, a renowned nuclear expert on North Korea, in cooperation with the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University made a projection that North Korea's denuclearization will

take 10 years. Given this report, Bolton's timeframe of 2 years for completing denuclearization does not sound realistic.

Bolton's book proves that North Korea-U.S. denuclearization negotiations were underway in the midst of cacophony within the U.S. negotiating team and uncertainty over President Trump's predilection for scoring political gains. Bolton could be seen as having contributed largely to inducing the breakdown of the DPRK-U.S. negotiation given that he excluded various forms of possible denuclearization, based on his blind faith in the Libyan model, which is completely different in nature from North Korea's nuclear issues. According to the memoir, North Korea, too, did not prepare any other alternatives other than the Yongbyon dismantlement, which was too rigid a concession, thus making the negotiation all the more difficult.

The Need for the DPRK-U.S. Summit before the U.S. Presidential Election

What is desirable is to reach a denuclearization agreement by holding the DPRK-U.S. summit this year before the U.S. presidential election. If the agreement on denuclearization were to be concluded between the DPRK and the U.S. before the U.S. presidential election, President Trump, if re-elected, has no reason to undo the agreement he made with the North. The situation is the same if Democratic presidential nominee Biden gets elected. Even though President Trump withdrew international agreements and commitments signed by the past administration, such as the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris Climate Agreement after he came into office, a Democratic administration that favors dialogue is highly unlikely to abolish the agreements signed by the previous administration. Reaching a denuclearization agreement within Trump's term is not disadvantageous to North Korea.

Currently, President Trump is trailing Democratic candidate Joe Biden and is facing challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the killing of George Floyd. If North Korea were to resume the ICBM launch under the current situation, it would be disastrous to President Trump. A stable maintenance of North Korea's nuclear issues is the most minimum strategy that Trump desires while drawing a

fruitful result from the denuclearization negotiations is the maximum. The possible ‘surprise North Korea–U.S. summit in October’ is a card that can be deployed by Trump, who is known to be a dealmaker. If tangible results came out of the North Korea–U.S. denuclearization negotiations, it would be at Trump’s advantage in the presidential election.

A sense of fatigue has accumulated in North Korea’s economy, which is currently bound by sanctions. The damages caused by the coronavirus continue to spread widely. A major part of the agenda of the Politburo Meeting hosted by Chairman Kim Jong-un on June 7 involved measures to guarantee the livelihood of Pyongyang residents, of which major items on the agenda include housing, sewage system, and the supply of vegetables. Electricity shortage is already a chronic issue and the very center of the North Korean regime, Pyongyang, is no exception. According to a North Korean media report on July 20, Chairman Kim visited a construction site at the Pyongyang General Hospital, reprimanded the officials for issues of funding and materials, and also criticized the fact that it is causing a burden on people. The construction of the Pyongyang General Hospital, a main flagship project of Chairman Kim, is not progressing as planned so Chairman Kim ordered to reshuffle the related officials in charge.

North Korea’s food crisis is also worsening. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020 (SOFI 2020) report was released by five UN-affiliated international organizations on July 13. According to this report, 47.6% of the entire North Korean population suffered from malnutrition from 2016–2019, a figure worse than last year. Considering the coronavirus pandemic, which caused a lack of fertilizers, of agricultural support, and of water for agricultural use in the first half of this year, North Korea will continue to witness an inevitable deepening of its food crisis. The longer the North Korea–U.S. denuclearization talks go without a breakthrough, the more difficulties the North Korean economy will face.

How to Make a Deal in the Initial Denuclearization Agreement: ‘From Yongbyon’

The positive way of looking at things is that both North Korea and the U.S. are in need of negotiations. The problem is that the summit diplomacy designed for the photo-op has long lost its use and that now is the time for achieving tangible results. It is important to create an irreversible entry via an initial agreement between North Korea and the U.S. to achieve a long-term and comprehensive goal, which is North Korea’s denuclearization. To that end, it is necessary to review how to draw the initial agreement of denuclearization starting with a ‘From Yongbyon,’ which has reflected what was discussed in summits in Singapore and Hanoi. ‘From Yongbyon’ is about reaching an initial agreement on denuclearization between North Korea and the U.S. on the basis of a comprehensive agreement and phased implementation centering around the end-of-war declaration and the dismantlement of the Yongbyon nuclear complex.

Above all, one needs to create an atmosphere for dialogue. North Korea stopped its aggressive offensive toward South Korea and the U.S. The North does not appear to have approved additional military action raised by the General Staff Department (GSD) of the Korean People’s Army (KPA) at the Central Military Commission on July 18. The Republic of Korea (ROK) and the U.S. also need to review how to create mood for dialogue by showing gestures, such as either a reduction or suspension of *Dong Maeng*(meaning alliance) 20-II military exercise scheduled for mid-August. The continued spread of the COVID-19 provides the rationale for suspending the ROK-U.S. military drills. It is necessary to find an alternative way of verifying Future Alliance Command’s Full operating capability (FOC) in preparation for the transition of the wartime operational control (OPCON).

On July 10, the First Vice Director Kim Yo-jong stated in a discourse that “Now is the time to change a main theme in past DPRK-U.S negotiations, denuclearization measures vs. sanctions, to a new framework of withdrawal of hostile policies vs. the resumption of the DPRK-U.S. negotiations.” If the end-of-war declaration is separated out from the peace agreement in the form of the limited political declaration, it could maximize a symbolic action of improved relations

without further burdening both parties. If an end-of-war declaration came out of the DPRK-U.S. talks, it could become a tangible measure to withdraw the U.S.'s hostile policies toward North Korea. Under this scenario, North Korea would be able to re-announce a complete denuclearization with more clarity and declare a freeze on nuclear programs as hostile relations will have been put to an end between the two parties. In addition, it will lead to drafting an overall roadmap of the denuclearization actions and corresponding measures. The Chinese People's Volunteer Army, one of the participants in the Korean War, has long been gone from North Korea, and a majority of UN member states who participated in the Korean War have already established diplomatic ties with North Korea. Both South and North Korea reached a de facto agreement on the end-of-war declaration via inter-Korean summits in the past. If North Korea and the U.S. were to agree on the declaration, it will put a political end to the Korean War.

It is necessary to come up with a creative mixture of North Korea's denuclearization measures and the U.S.'s corresponding measures centering around the Yongbyon nuclear complex, which was already offered by North Korea, in addition to the end-of-war declaration. The Yongbyon nuclear complex is a core facility that produces nuclear materials, including platinum, highly enriched uranium (HEU), and tritium. In particular, if the Yongbyon facility is dismantled, it will limit the production of tritium, making it difficult to operate the H-bomb system (fusion weapons) for the long-term. North Korea offering the Yongbyon nuclear complex means that it will forgo the stage of extracting nuclear materials. Therefore, if North Korea were to offer the HEU facility outside of Yongbyon for dismantlement, it will serve as an opportunity to show the sincerity of North Korea's denuclearization intention.

The U.S. could also take forward-looking corresponding measures. The dismantlement of the entire stage of production of nuclear materials will fundamentally limit the sustainability of North Korea's nuclear program. It would be an unprecedented achievement, not reached by any other U.S. administrations, which makes it one of the appealing options for Trump to choose. The U.S.'s corresponding measures would be measures to improve relations, such as the installment of a liaison

office, and the partial lifting of sanctions in humanitarian areas. As Ri Yong-ho, North Korea's Foreign Minister, said in Hanoi: "If some of the UN sanctions are lifted on areas that hinder people's economy and people's livelihood," the scope of sanctions-lifting can be up for negotiation. A permanent dismantlement of the Yongbyon nuclear complex is irreversible while the sanctions imposed on North Korea, after easing, could always be re-imposed again, which makes it a reversible measure. The U.S. will not be at a disadvantage at all if it accepts North Korea's Yongbyon offer. If the DPRK and the U.S. could make an initial agreement on denuclearization, a phased step to realize a complete denuclearization can be taken.

Time has come to reopen a venue for dialogue both in inter-Korean relations and denuclearization talks, drawing on lessons of the peace process on the Korean Peninsula from the last two years. The ROK's role is crucial here. It should utilize a special envoy to North Korea and the U.S. when deemed necessary and add momentum to North Korea-U.S. summit before the U.S. presidential election by holding summits between the two Koreas and between the ROK and the U.S. as soon as possible. It is important for the ROK to actively garner the momentum in inter-Korean relations. The ROK government should pursue large-scale humanitarian aid projects in health and medical sectors, and make tangible efforts to resume tours to Mt. Geumgang and the operation of the Gaesong Industrial Complex (GIC) and link railways and roads. It is necessary to promote creative ways to improve mutual trust by actively seeking inter-Korean cooperation projects that are feasible at this stage while taking account of the sanctions' enforcement. Now is the time to once again foster a Korea Initiative for the Peace Process on the Korean Peninsula. ©KINU 2020

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