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The Recent ‘Cozying-up’ of North Korea-China and the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula

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The ‘cozying-up’ of North Korea and China despite the COVID-19 pandemic is a consequence of the interactions among deepening of the strategic competition between the U.S. and China, North Korea’s ‘triple distress,’ and the stalemate in North Korea-U.S. negotiations and inter-Korean relations. The consolidation of the Sino-North Korean relations can negatively influence the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula which includes sanctions against North Korea, but it can also turn into an opportunity by actively bringing up the discussions on the role of China. South Korea needs to share with the international community (including China) its phased approach toward the denuclearization of North Korea and the relevant corresponding measures that ought to be taken by the international community. It also needs to suggest preemptive measures for reactivating the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula by restoring political and military trust between the two Koreas and tripartite cooperation among the two Koreas and China.

Amid COVID-19, Pyongyang and Beijing are ‘cozying up to each other’ through the so-called ‘letter diplomacy’ and blunt ‘side-taking’ on regional issues. The cozying-up between North Korea and China is a consequence of the interactions among the deepening of the strategic competition between the U.S. and China, the economic distress of North Korea amid sanctions, and the stalemate in North Korea-U.S. negotiations and inter-Korean relations. Depending on the result of the U.S. presidential election on November 3, Sino-North Korea relations can qualitatively transform to a new level. This paper examines the context in which Sino-North Korea relations have been consolidated amid COVID-19 from the perspective of the two countries and derive implications for the Korean Peninsula.

The Context behind the Recent ‘Cozying-up’ of Sino-North Korea Relations

An important reason behind the recent cozying-up of Sino-North Korea relations is that the two sides become increasingly aware of how important each other’s strategic utility is. This factor has already received the spotlight during the drastic changes in the state of affairs surrounding the Korean Peninsula from 2018 to 2019. Until 2018, the Chinese leadership maintained a divided stance: opposing North Korea’s nuclear and missile provocations while also opposing sanctions against North Korea that threatened the survival of the North Korean regime. Also, North Korea was not happy about China’s participation in the sanctions. Hence, Sino-North Korea relations were in a lull for some time. However, during the transformations led by the two Koreas and the United States in the state of affairs surrounding the Korean Peninsula in 2018, North Korea and China held five summits, strengthened their ‘strategic communication and cooperation’ expressing their intent to turn the direction of international affairs to their benefit. This trend of ‘cozying-up’ is still an on-going process amid COVID-19.

For North Korea, strengthening cooperative relations with China is inevitable considering that it is experiencing a ‘triple distress’: 1) economic distress due to continued sanctions, 2) natural disasters, and 3) COVID-19. After the breakout of COVID-19 in mid-December of 2019, North Korea has banned all travelers from

China beginning in mid-January, halting all exchange and cooperation. Nonetheless, the two countries have continued their friendly and cooperative relations through ‘letter diplomacy’ and ‘diplomacy based on exchange of congratulatory messages’ surrounding cooperation for the prevention of COVID-19. Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping exchanged letters and verbal letters in February and May of 2020 to emphasize the need for cooperation surrounding the prevention of COVID-19. Chairman Xi has also sent a congratulatory message to Kim Jong Un in light of the 72nd anniversary of the foundation of North Korean regime (September 9), emphasizing the mutual support and the deepened relations between North Korea and China. Such events also hint at the possibility of actual support from China on COVID-19 prevention.

At the same time, North Korea is seeking to expand its strategic room by utilizing the escalating strategic competition between the U.S. and China and further stabilize its friendly and cooperative relations with China to prepare for a potential resumption of North Korea-U.S. negotiations after the U.S. presidential election. Both North Korea and the U.S. are too distracted by domestic and international affairs of their own to resume denuclearization talks and, for now, are focused merely on ‘managing’ the situation. However, while it may take some time, the two parties are predicted to make various attempts to create a consensus on North Korea-U.S. negotiations after the presidential election on November 3. Hence, North Korea is trying to turn the table in its favor in order to gain an upper hand in the negotiation between denuclearization and regime assurance by strengthening its ties with China, whose relationship with the U.S. continues to degenerate.

Next, China is maintaining and strengthening its friendly ties with North Korea to maintain and expand its regional influence amid the exacerbating strategic competition with the U.S. Since the Sino-American conflict spurred in 2018 in trade and commerce, the range of conflict has been increasing, touching on issues like 5G technology, future technology, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. Also, the conflict has the potential to expand into an ideological competition and conflict after the U.S.’s criticism of the Communist Party-system of China in the White House report titled ‘*United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China.*’ The U.S. and China are still playing the blame game on COVID-19: the

U.S.-led 'liberal international order' and China-led 'authoritarian international order' have the potential to conflict in the international arena. Therefore, the Sino-American strategic competition will further accelerate.

In the midst of such a trend, China seeks to maintain and expand its influence on the issues regarding the Korean Peninsula and ultimately undercut the U.S.'s regional influence by strengthening its ties with North Korea, which is a socialist country with a high geopolitical value. In fact, in his verbal letter on COVID-19 (May 9) and congratulatory message on the anniversary of the foundation of North Korean regime (September 9) and the 75th anniversary of the Worker's Party of Korea (October 10), Chairman Xi emphasized how North Korea and China can contribute not only to the development of their relationship but also to the realization of peace, stability, and prosperity of the region. China's move can be thought of as laying the grounds for its competition with the U.S. on regional influence by strengthening its ties with North Korea through an emphasis on its geopolitical value and the shared socialist identity of the two countries.

Furthermore, when Chairman Xi emphasized how China has 'supported North Korea against the United States' in commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Korean War (October 25), Kim Jong Un responded by paying respects at the Cemetery of the People's Voluntary Army. The cozying-up approach of the two parties took place under a common denominator of 'anti-Americanism,' and is likely to continue after the November 3rd presidential election. The U.S. will take considerable time in deciding whether to repeat its path dependency or to devise a new policy on North Korea. China can also transition from a strategic competition phase to a cooperation phase after the election. Anyhow, North Korea-U.S. negotiation is unlikely to take place until early 2021. Hence, in the face of a potentially extended stalemate on the 'denuclearization vs. regime assurance' negotiation, North Korea will try to maintain and strengthen its ties with China—the supporter and sponsor. China is also cognizant of the possibility that the U.S.'s 'strong' policies against China will remain intact regardless of who is elected President. Hence, the Xi administration will try to maintain and strengthen its strategic communication and cooperation with North Korea to secure strategic leverage for creating new relations

with the incoming U.S. administration, including on issues of negotiations on trade and commerce.

Implications for the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula

For Sino-North Korea relation to cozy up (or consolidate) means that economic and other forms of cooperation between the two countries are going to expand and that strategic communication and cooperation on important regional issues (like those about the U.S.) will intensify. In the face of growing Sino-American strategic competition, extending stalemate between North Korea and the U.S., and stagnating inter-Korea relations, how will the consolidation of Sino-North Korea relations affect the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula? In short, while challenges abound, opportunities also exist.

First, consolidating Sino-North Korean relations can loosen the sanctions against North Korea, negatively influencing peace in the Korean Peninsula and inter-Korean relations. If North Korea requests large scale economic support and China responds favorably by promoting official and unofficial economic cooperation, international cooperation on sanctions against North Korea may come loose. However, considering the deepening Sino-American strategic competition and the U.S.'s pressure against China, China is unlikely to preemptively undermine the sanctions against North Korea imposed by the United Nations and the international community. Still, like when it submitted in December of 2019 the first draft of a U.N. resolution devised with Russia easing sanctions against North Korea, China can support North Korea by emphasizing that sanctions must not threaten the survival of the North Korean regime. Also, in case of sanctions not being strictly enforced due to the Sino-North Korea 'cozying-up,' government-led inter-Korean cooperation measures like a 'small trade' could also face challenges. Hence, South Korea needs to clarify that sanctions exist to derive positive attitude change from North Korea and to request China and the international community to join in the phased approach toward the denuclearization of North Korea and the relevant corresponding measures that ought to be taken by the international community.

On the other hand, considering the unique history shared between North Korea and China and their current domestic and international circumstances, consolidation of their relations can act as an opportunity to resume the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula. While Sino-North Korea relations existed fundamentally as a friendly and cooperative relationship since their establishment of their diplomatic relations in 1949, they reciprocally maintain hints of ‘strategic distrust’ due to factors such as Sino-South Korea diplomatic relations, North Korean nuclear and missile provocations, China’s firm stance on denuclearization, and China’s participation in sanctions against North Korea. North Korea can be seen as strengthening its ties with China under strategic needs to overcome the ‘triple distress’ and to prepare for a potential resumption of negotiations with the new American administration: it is not necessarily putting an unwavering trust in China. China is also not in a position to support North Korea at the cost of violating international sanctions. It is facing conflicts with the U.S. that is expanding out to the fields of trade, technology, finance, regime, and ideology all while adjusting to domestic troubles in the post-COVID-19 era. During an interview at the National People’s Congress in May, Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized the importance of North Korea-U.S. talks in resolving the problems of the Korean Peninsula while, at the same time, criticizing the lack of practical response from the U.S. in light of North Korea’s denuclearization efforts and emphasizing the ‘responsibility of the U.S.’ If South Korea can utilize the ‘role of China’ rhetoric, the present situation can be utilized to its benefit.

If South Korea is able to figure out and leverage the ‘weak spots’ China and North Korea have against each other, the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula may be able to resume. Especially, it is important to draw China’s active and constructive participation in the process of denuclearization and establishing a peace regime in the Korean Peninsula: after all, China is the one that has the most strategic leverage against North Korea. The most realistic shot at drawing such participation from China lies in better inter-Korean relations. China officially supports the development of inter-Korean relations as it pertains to regional stability, and North Korea is also likely to seek better inter-Korean relations in the face of the stagnating North Korea-U.S. negotiation. Hence, South Korea should preemptively foster the

atmosphere for the resumption of the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula after the November presidential election in the U.S. and the 8th Congress of the Worker's Party of Korea in order to recover political and military trust between the two Koreas.

During the strategic competition with the U.S., China has been using economic cooperation as a medium for incorporating countries in the region into its sphere of influence. Here lies potential in bettering Sino-South Korea relations: South Korea should point to the Korean Peninsula's geopolitical and geo-economics value to persuade North Korea. Considering the complexities surrounding the Korean Peninsula, North Korea-U.S. stalemate, inter-Korean stalemate, Sino-American strategic competition, and COVID-19, South Korea ought to not only push for better inter-Korean relations but also for North Korea's response toward (micro) multilateral cooperation with surrounding countries, including China and international organizations. For instance, in a pandemic situation, the two Koreas and China all require urgent medical cooperation: South Korea ought to promote inter-Korean medical cooperation as well as figure out ways to provide humanitarian aid through China and international organizations. Also, while COVID-19 is a complicating factor, South Korea should preemptively facilitate tourism cooperation with North Korea by cooperating with China to draw out North Korea's participation. ©KINU 2020

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