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North Korea's 'Signs of Crisis' and the Entrance Strategy of the Peace Process on the Korean Peninsula

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Recently, North Korea censured officials at the extended Politburo meeting, saying that a 'grand event' occurred due to state emergency prevention issues. However, the essence of the problem is related to structural issues, such as the economic crisis, food shortages, and slackened discipline in ideology. It is reasonable to assume that North Korea uses emergency prevention issues as a pretext to pass the buck for policy failure and scapegoat executive officials. Although it is positive that both sides—the U.S. and North Korea—seek dialogues, North Korea policy of the U.S. lacks details and North Korea potentially faces the worsening of the crisis. The task at hand is to come up with an entrance strategy of the peace process on the Korean Peninsula to establish the denuclearization-peace regime and secure the sustainability of the development of inter-Korean relations.

The 2nd Extended Politburo Meeting of the 8th WPK Central Committee and 'Signs of Crisis' in North Korea

North Korea announced at the extended Politburo meeting of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) on June 29 that a 'grand event' happened that triggered the crisis of the state and the people. Although Chairman

Kim Jong-un mentioned that a ‘grand event’ occurred due to the ‘negligence of implementation of Party’s major decisions regarding national emergency prevention crisis, the causes of the event appear to be more complex. The extended Politburo meeting did not address emergency prevention, which was pointed out as a cause of this ‘grand event.’ Instead, irresponsibility and incapability of officials, such as the ‘negligence of the job,’ ‘self-protectionism and passiveness,’ and “faults in making negative impacts on the stability of people’s livelihood and the construction of the economy” were mostly mentioned. An article at *Rodong Sinmun* covering the extended Politburo meeting on June 30 mentioned ‘prevention’ only three times and ‘executive officials’ as much as 39 times. The newspaper stated that Chairman Kim excoriated executive officials and emphasized that “The behavior of executive officials will never be condoned...It is time to revolutionalize executive officials first before resolving economic issues.” While the same vigilance regarding the prevention of the corona pandemic was mentioned in all the media in North Korea, including *Rodong Sinmun*, the role of executive officials was stressed. After all, the essence of the ‘grand event’ was not prevention of COVID-19 but issues of executive officials.

Rodong Sinmun reported that this extended Politburo meeting “summoned and managed members and alternate members of Politburo Standing Committee and of the Politburo of the Party Central Committee, summoned and elected secretary of the Party Central Committee, and relocated and appointed executive officials of the national organizations.” The appointment this time was to censure a massive number of officials at the Party and the cabinet. If it were an issue of emergency prevention of coronavirus, a limited censure would have sufficed. Ri Pyong-chol, a permanent member of the Central Committee and Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission and Park Jung-chun, Chief of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army, who are presumed to be the subjects of censure, are military officials and not directly involved in emergency prevention. A possibility of follow-up censure or purge cannot be ruled out since a decision was made to “thoroughly review and evaluate at the party and legal level, and come up with a solution” at this extended

meeting. An investigation and solution at the ‘party and legal’ level is indicative of the maximum level of punishment in North Korea. It is reasonable to question the intention behind this decision, which is to pass the buck for policy failure and scapegoat executive officials using emergency prevention issues as a pretext.

This year a total of 11 important meetings related to the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) have been held over six months as follows: the 8th Congress of WPK, the Plenary Meetings of the Central Committee of the WPK three times, meetings of Central Military Commission two times, extended Politburo meetings two times, a Cell Secretaries’ Meeting of the WPK, a lecturer on the head secretary of city and county, and a Consultative Meeting of Senior Officials of WPK Central Committee and Provincial Party Committee. Chairman Kim has continuously emphasized the responsibility and role of executive officials in every meeting. In this meeting, he ordered, “executive officials to tirelessly follow through on party decisions without a doubt.” Chairman Kim appeared to noticeably lose weight. The Korean Central Television (KCTV) broadcast an interview of North Koreans saying “People were heartbroken when they saw Chairman Kim look haggard.” It may aim to highlight the contrast between Chairman Kim’s ‘devoted’ appearance and executive officials’ irresponsibility and incapability. Furthermore, major labor groups’ associations were held one after another, such as the League of Socialist Working Youth, General Federation of Trade Unions of Korea (GFTUK), and Democratic Women’s League. Such a frequent hosting of meetings was unprecedented in the history of North Korea. What warrants attention is that all of the major meetings discussed the economic crisis and anti-socialist and non-socialist issues as major items on the meeting agenda.

Chairman Kim acknowledged at the 8th WPK Congress in January this year that a five-year economic development plan, set in 2016, “significantly fell short of targeted goals in almost all the sectors.” He went on a strong censure at the 2nd Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the WPK in February that the targeted goals submitted from each sector were not sufficient enough. Chairman Kim declared at the 6th Cell Secretaries’ Meeting that he decided on a ‘more grueling

Arduous March.’ The memory of the Arduous March of the 1990s remained a nightmare for North Korean people. Last March, Chairman Kim participated in a ground-breaking ceremony for the construction of Pyongyang General Hospital and was ordered to complete the construction by the 75th anniversary of the WPK foundation in October, a goal that failed to be met. Chairman Kim Jong-un participated in a ground-breaking ceremony at the Suncheon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory in May last year. North Korean media outlets relentlessly publicize this calling it the ‘first victory of frontal breakthrough.’ However, none of the news on producing fertilizers at Suncheon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory was reported ever since despite a severe shortage of fertilizers in North Korea. Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist area, Chairman Kim’s major project ever since he took power, has been drifting for years extending the construction deadline several times. The current status of progress demonstrates that even major projects directly ordered by Chairman Kim have a hard time meeting the set goals.

Chairman Kim stressed at the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the WPK in mid-June that “The food shortage issue has become serious” and that farming is the “primary” task above all else. As of late June, North Korea’s rice and corn price was around 4000 won/kg and 2000 won/kg respectively. The price in certain areas, such as Ryanggangdo and Chagangdo, skyrocketed to the maximum of around 7000 won and 5000 won respectively. It is noteworthy that such a phenomenon was unprecedented under the Kim Jong-un regime. A halt of China-North Korea trade caused a severe shortage in the number of fertilizers and vinyl covers, necessary for the farming of the first half of this year. Besides, not enough sunlight in daytime makes the prospects of this year’s farming gloomy. Various indicators also point to the severity of North Korea’s food shortages as revealed in a report on ‘North Korea’s agriculture and food situation in 2020 and the prospects for 2021’ of the KDI Review of the North Korean economy last June and an FAO report on ‘Food Supply and Demand Outlook in 2020/21.’

Slackened discipline in ideology appears to be severe. It was reported that North Korea enacted a law against the influx of anti-socialist culture last December. With

the enactment, those who violated the law get to be executed as the maximum punishment. Every meeting held this year discussed anti- and non-socialist phenomenon as a major item on the meeting agenda. Chairman Kim emphasized the need to restrain the anti- and non-socialist phenomenon at the 8th Party Congress this January. At the Cell Secretaries' Meeting of the WPK this April, he ordered to control the "attire, hairstyle, wording, and relationship with other people" of young people. Chairman Kim mentioned in a letter sent to the 8th Congress of the General Federation of Trade Unions of Korea (GFTUK) in late May that anti- and non-socialist struggle is the primary task. He stressed at the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the WPK in mid-June that the fate of North Korea hinges on a struggle against anti- and non-socialism.

With all the situation factored in, one can reasonably presume that North Korea faces a severe economic crisis, food shortages, and slackened discipline in ideology due to prolonged sanctions, COVID-induced isolation to the level of state blockade, and the aftermath of last year's floods.

Challenges for the Situation on the Korean Peninsula

Issues facing North Korea are structural problems and can be fundamentally resolved by establishing the denuclearization-peace regime on the Korean Peninsula and creating new inter-Korean relations. To that end, progress in North Korea-U.S. denuclearization negotiations is required. However, there lie factors of opportunities and crisis in the current situation on the Korean Peninsula. It is positive that the Biden administration completed a review on its North Korea policy as of late April and announced a calibrated practical approach as the new policy line. A 'calibrated practical approach' is an approach that could be less burdensome and thus appeal to North Korea more since it pursues a phased retrenchment of nuclear capability in the form of small deal. The Biden administration keeps emphasizing that the door to diplomacy is open and calls for dialogue, which is also deemed positive. It deserves the attention that the U.S. prepares itself for denuclearization negotiations with North

Korea by appointing Sung Kim, the U.S. ambassador to Indonesia as Special Representative for North Korea.

North Korea, too, appears to exercise ‘North Korea’s version of strategic patience’ which is a strategy of managing the situation in favor of dialogue. After a breakdown in the North Korea–U.S. summit in Hanoi in February 2019, North Korea still complies with a moratorium on nuclear testing and long-range ICBM launching, a halt that the North voluntarily declared. North Korea has refrained from strategic provocation or strongly criticizing the U.S. ever since President Biden got elected and sworn into office. When it comes to the U.S., North Korea upholds the principle of ‘responding to power with power and goodwill with goodwill,’ which hints that it will accommodate the goodwill suggestion for negotiations. In June, Chairman Kim ordered at the 3rd Plenary Meeting of 8th Central Committee of the WPK to prepare for both ‘dialogue and confrontation’ without mentioning hostile remarks toward the U.S. and South Korea. Chairman Kim also mentioned that he will focus on “maintaining the situation of the Chosun peninsula on a stable footing.” On June 22 and 23, the first vice-department director of WPK Central Committee Kim Yo-jong and North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Son-gwon mentioned ‘dream-reading as opposed to dream,’ and ‘meaningless contact of any kind with the U.S. and possibility.’ However, those can not be viewed as a refusal to dialogue with the U.S. Rather, it can be interpreted as an intention to stably manage the current situation and prepare for North Korea–U.S. dialogue that could bear the fruits.

Challenges, though, lie in that the details of a ‘calibrated practical approach’ of the U.S. are yet to be released. The U.S. appears to think that North Korea is the one with a ball, but the North has not responded to this. The combined military force of the ROK–U.S. alliance outnumbered North Korea’s conventional military force, aside from its nuclear arsenal. Given that North Korea has publicized nuclear possession as the national pride to its people, it would not be easy to publicly choose a denuclearization path. That is why North Korea’s voluntary denuclearization is difficult so a paradigm shift to a ‘forced denuclearization’ is necessary. The forced denuclearization can be divided into positive enforcement and negative enforcement.

The positive enforcement is to provide strong incentives for North Korea to agree to sit down for negotiations. Negative enforcement, on the other hand, is to directly put pressure on the security of the regime. Most of the dictatorship turns a blind eye to the sufferings of its people and prioritizes the regime's security. Instability inherent in dictatorship could bring about yet another high-cost structure so positive enforcement should come first when it comes to denuclearization negotiation between the U.S. and North Korea. However, the Biden administration's 'calibrated practical approach' does not provide detailed alternatives to induce North Korea. The Biden administration is also not free from criticism in that it focuses on managing the situation as opposed to achieving something out of the denuclearization negotiations.

It is doubtful if 'North Korea's version of strategic patience' would last long. The Kim Jong-un regime, faced with compounding multiple crises, would suffer more if the external environment worsens. Should North Korea choose a strategic provocation, it could destroy the negotiation phase for denuclearization, which would be a burdensome choice for North Korea. The problem, however, is that North Korea's economic crisis is worsening and that normalizing trade with China does not seem feasible in the short term due to the state emergency prevention efforts. A dramatic worsening of the internal situation in North Korea may create a high-cost structure in the situation of the Korean Peninsula. North Korea, unlike the U.S., is running out of time and thus may take on an unwanted path of 'forced provocation' just to induce a change in the attitudes of the U.S. It should not be overlooked that North Korea thus far has employed a strategy of upping the negotiation leverage through provocations.

The domestic political situation in South Korea should also be factored in. The Moon Jae-in government's remaining term is only 10 months away. The election season already began triggered by presidential candidates' announcements for running for election and primary elections. Time constrains at the end of Moon's tenure and the full phase of the presidential election could become a burden on resuming the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. The Declaration on the

Advancement of South–North Korean Relations, Peace and Prosperity on October 4, 2007, proclaimed during the end of the Roh Moo–hyun administration got drifted due to a change of the government and one could learn a lesson from that.

The Strategy of Entrance into the Peace Process on the Korean Peninsula

The task at hand is to stably manage the situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula and to come up with an entrance strategy on securing the sustainability of the denuclearization–peace process. In the history of mankind, not a single country armed with complex nuclear capability like North Korea ever voluntarily denuclearized. Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus dismantled nuclear weapons, which were dispatched from the central Soviet Union and lacked the inner capability to maintain nuclear programs. Lybia had a relatively simple nuclear program given that it was at the initial phase of nuclear enrichment. On the contrary, North Korea possesses encompassing and comprehensive nuclear programs involving mining, refining, and reprocessing of uranium, producing tritium, and manufacturing and dispatching mid–and long–range ballistic missiles. Dr. Siegfried S. Hecker at Stanford University, a world–renowned expert on North Korean nuclear programs, once said that denuclearizing North Korea will take at least 10 to 15 years.

Considering the characteristics of North Korea’s nuclear programs, the realistic option would be to reach a comprehensive agreement, implement it in phase, craft a denuclearization roadmap based on the action–for–action principle, and take denuclearization measures in sync with corresponding measures. The implementation of the denuclearization roadmap can be divided into three phases: 1) an entrance stage at the initial stage, 2) a core stage, and 3) a residue stage.

What matters at the current phase is an implementation strategy at the entry–level. A combination of denuclearization action at each stage and corresponding measures could change at any time but what is important at the entry–level is to create an irreversible entrance thereby securing the sustainability of the denuclearization process. To implement the actions at the entry–level, one should pay attention to

Hanoi, not Singapore. A follow-up measure after the North Korea-U.S. summit in Singapore was only limited to sending the remains of U.S. soldiers who died in the Korean War back to the U.S. although the summit affirmed the wills of both sides on the improvement of bilateral relations, a peace regime establishment, and complete denuclearization. On the other hand, the North Korea-U.S. summit in Hanoi had negotiations on how to implement North Korea's denuclearization actions and the U.S.'s corresponding measures. Despite criticism, the Trump administration put in action the normal diplomatic channel with North Korea for the first time and induced North Korea to state the will to dismantle Yongbyon nuclear complex.

Therefore, implementation at the entry-level should start with the 'From Yongbyon' negotiation proposal, which utilizes 'Trump legacy.' Suggestions of 'from Yongbyon' proposal are as follows: North Korea suspends nuclear sophistication, which means freezing, and dismantles Yongbyon nuclear complex; in return, the U.S. allows the end-of-the war declaration, or establishes a liaison office between North Korea and the U.S., and partially lifts sanctions imposed on the North; and the government of the Republic of Korea (ROK) resumes the tour to Mt. Geumgang and Gaesong Industrial Complex (GIC) and links inter-Korean railway and roads. The implementation of the 'from Yongbyon' negotiation proposal at the entry-level focuses on dismantling the Yongbyon facility. It is as beneficial to the U.S. in that it will bring about an actual reduction of North Korea's nuclear capability as it is to the ROK in that it will grant it an impetus to rekindle inter-Korean relations.

The second most important measure is to dismantle the very essence of North Korea's nuclear capability aside from Yongbyon, including all the highly-enriched uranium (HEU) facilities and mid-to long-range ballistic missiles. The U.S. could put forward reaching a peace agreement and establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea as a corresponding measure. South Korea could conclude a basic inter-Korean agreement and actively create an inclusive inter-Korean life community encompassing inter-Korean economy, society, culture, and life community. Even with the implementation of core phases, mounting tasks remain on how to dismantle North Korea's ubiquitous nuclear programs and transition to

a system of peaceful usage. This falls into the third residue stage, which could be dealt with as the mid-to-long-term task when direct nuclear threats are removed.

President Biden expressed his support for inter-Korean dialogue, engagement, and cooperation at the ROK-U.S. summit held on May 21. Reportedly there existed inter-Korean communications before and after the ROK-U.S. summit. Signs for dialogue between North Korea and the U.S. are still in the air. It is time to realize the Korea initiative, which minimizes crisis factors and maximizes opportunity factors, thereby creating an irreversible entrance into the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, it is necessary to establish a system of food and medical assistance to prepare for North Korea's humanitarian crisis and to strengthen the ROK-U.S. coordination. ©KINU 2021

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