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Evaluation and Prospects on the Reopening of the Inter-Korean Communications Hotline and North Korea's Resistance Against the Korea-U.S. Joint Military Exercise

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Despite the recovery of the Inter-Korean Communications Hotline on July 27, North Korea is rejecting to respond to South Korean contacts in protest of the ROK-U.S. Joint Military Exercise. The recovery of the Inter-Korean Communications Hotline has been an executive-level agreement, and, on March 30, South Korea began implementing the revised version of the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act which limits the sending of anti-North Korean leaflets that North Korea was perturbed by. Considering the various domestic and international threats pressuring North Korea (i.e., economic crisis), its response is predicted to be mediocre, if not mild, and dialogues will continue to gain momentum. The focus should be on the Peace Process on the Korean Peninsula that anticipates the process going from an Inter-Korean Summit (virtual) to North Korea-U.S. working-level talks and eventually to a North Korea-U.S. summit.

■ Behind the Recovery of the Inter-Korean Communications Hotline

On July 27, the two Koreas normalized the Inter-Korean Communication Hotline, putting it back to operation. However, on August 1, Deputy Director Kim Yo-jong

warned that a Korea-U.S. Joint Military Exercise will result in an “undesired prelude” to inter-Korean relations. After the preliminary exercise has begun, she immediately made a statement criticizing the decision as a “self-destructive and consequential behavior.” The head of the United Front Department Kim Yong-chol also published a statement on August 11 proposing an “incredible security threat.” Since then, the North Korean ambassador to Russia and China, along with the propaganda media in North Korea, criticized South Korea and declared the Joint Military Exercise as a preparation for a nuclear war against North Korea. In response, they called for further strengthening of their ‘absolute deterrent force (nuclear power)’ and repeatedly called for the removal of the U.S. troops in South Korea. After August 10, North Korea has not been responding to the contacts made from South Korea via the Inter-Korean Communications Hotline.

The recovery and suspension of the Inter-Korean Communications Hotline should be interpreted not as a short-term factor but more within the flow of the state of affairs revolving around the Korean Peninsula. The recovery of the Inter-Korean Communications Hotline has been an executive-level agreement and can be seen as an attempt at alleviating inter-Korean relations. During the 8th Congress of the Worker’s Party of Korea (WPK), Chairman Kim Jong-un announced that inter-Korean relations can soon return to the likes of the rosy days three years ago. In January, President Moon Jae-in has also hinted his willingness to “pour his final efforts to bring about a great transformation in inter-Korean talks.” During its July 27 briefing, the Blue House has disclosed that, since April, there have been multiple exchanges of letters between the two leaders about the recovery of the Hotline and inter-Korean relations. On the same day, the Korean Central News Agency has also reported that

the two leaders have agreed to take a big step forward in recovering trust and promoting reconciliation. They added that the leaders exchanged multiple letters in the effort to recover the Hotline and trust between the two governments. This implies that the two leaders have been discussing the recovery of the Hotline and inter-Korean relations since April.

The leaders of South Korea and the U.S. held a summit in Washington D.C. on May 21, and President Biden declared his support for South Korea's efforts to initiate inter-Korean talks and involvement and cooperation in North Korean issues. After the summit, the head of the National Intelligence Service Park Ji-won visited the U.S., and, on June 9 at the Intelligence Committee of the South Korean Congress, stated that the two Koreas had meaningful exchanges before and after the South Korea-U.S. summit. Existing information alludes to direct communication between the two Korean leaders before and after the South Korea-U.S. summit. In the Full Session of the WPK on June 17, Chairman Kim has ordered the "preparation for both talks and confrontations" and declared to "focus on the stable management of the situation in the Korean Peninsula." Interestingly, the Hotline was recovered soon after the Session. Hence, the recovery of the Hotline has the potential to be interpreted as a part of transition to a dialogue phase.

Intention Behind North Korea's Retaliation Against the South Korea-U.S. Joint Military Exercise

Using the dissemination of anti-North Korean leaflets as a justification, North Korea declared inter-Korean relations as a hostile one and unilaterally blocked the

Inter-Korean Communications Hotline. However, the revised version of the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act began limiting the dissemination of anti-North Korean leaflets in March of 2021. Hence, North Korea's justification has already been undermined by the time when the leaders exchanged letters in April.

Since the South Korea-U.S. Joint Military Exercise is not a preliminary practice for a nuclear war against North Korea and has been downsized, it is unlikely a real threat to North Korea. The South Korean military prepared for the exercise before the recovery of the Inter-Korean Communications Hotline on July 27, and North Korea may have detected the move. While North Korea criticized the South for a "treacherous decision," there is zero chance that South Korea would have promised to halt the Exercise. The Exercise is part of a bilateral agreement. If North Korea really found the Exercise to be critical, it would have checked before it recovered the Hotline. Hence, there must be a more complex reason behind North Korea's aggravation about the Exercise.

First, North Korea's inner crisis warrants attention. According to the Bank of Korea's July 30 report, North Korea's economic growth rate was at -4.5% -- lowest since the Arduous March. Even after Chairman Kim has signed the Special Supply Orders during the Full Session of the WPK in June, Hyesan, along with some other regions, are suffering from unstable food prices. North Korea did not even begin with COVID-19 vaccinations, and the prolonging of the pandemic is likely to prolong North Korea's border closures. During the April Conference of Cell Secretaries of the WPK, Chairman Kim declared a 'more destitute arduous march.' In the July Commanders and Political Worker's Seminar and the Conference of War Veterans, Chairman Kim evaluated the current situation as an "unprecedented challenge and hardship" and "a war-like

crisis,” respectively. While North Korea did not publicize the recovery of the Inter-Korean Communications Hotline, it did domestically publicize Deputy Director Kim Yo-jong and the Head of Department Kim Yong-chol’s criticizing statements. This hints at North Korea’s intention to strengthen regime solidarity during an economic crisis and multiple food shortages by escalating the threat from the South Korea-U.S. Joint Military Exercise.

North Korea is facing a complex problem that it cannot solve unilaterally. Hence, it requires a breakthrough in inter-Korean and North Korea-U.S. relations. The status of the denuclearization talks with the U.S. is an especially influential factor for the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula. While North Korea is demanding the easing of sanctions as a precondition, the U.S. is repeatedly demanding an unconditional talk. Due to the lack of trust from its experiences with the Trump administration, North Korea is demanding solid assurance from the Biden administration. It could have been pinpointing at the Joint Military Exercise as a justification for reconvening the talks and as a ‘litmus paper’ for judging the trustworthiness of those on the negotiation table. Its repeated emphasis on obtaining stronger nuclear power can also be interpreted as a means of pressuring the U.S.

In her August 10 speech, Deputy Director Kim Yo-jong demanded that “the U.S. remove the invasive threat and weapons from South Korea.” Since then, important figures and propaganda media have been demanding likewise. However, the U.S. Armed Forces in Korea are not an important issue, and North Korea did not bring the issue up during the South Korea-North Korea-U.S. Tripartite Summit in 2018 and 2019. Previous Minister of Unification Lim Dong-won’s autobiography ‘Peacemaker’ states that Kim Jong-il asked “the U.S. Armed Forces to stay” for peace

keeping's sake. In her autobiography, former Secretary of State Madelene Albright also disclosed that Kim Jong-il has mentioned the "role of the U.S. Armed Forces as a stabilizer." Hence, North Korea's demand for the removal of the U.S. Armed Forces can be seen not for the sake of realizability but for the sake of pressuring the U.S. in the North Korea-U.S. negotiations.

North Korea's focus on the U.S. Armed Forces in Korea seems to be also related to Sino-North Korea relations. In the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) held in August, Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China Wang Yi gave unusual disapproval of the South Korea-U.S. Joint Military Exercise, criticizing the U.S. for pressuring China. From August 9 to 13, China and Russia held a joint 'Sibu Cooperation 2021' exercise composed of around 10,000 armed soldiers and multiple state-of-the-art weaponry. The 'Sibu Cooperation 2021' exercise, which overlapped in timing with the South Korea-U.S. Joint Military Exercise, is, to a large extent, focused on providing a joint reaction to the event in Afghanistan and checks against the U.S. Meanwhile, North Korea has recently tended to emphasize Sino-North Korea and Russo-North Korea relations.

There's also pressure toward South Korea. North Korea requires massive-scale humanitarian aid to fight off its health care crisis, and South Korea is its only option in solving the issue in a stable manner since depending too much on China can lead to a threat against regime security. It is also dissatisfied with the role of the South Korean government during the Tripartite Summit in 2018 and 2019. North Korea continued to request the execution of the inter-Korean agreements. Also, North Korea seems to be demanding a firmer role from South Korea in motivating the U.S. during future denuclearization negotiations with the U.S.

Prospects

The economic crisis, food shortage, and health care crisis that spawn out of the pandemic do not have short-term solutions. The sanctions against North Korea are the core causes of the economic crisis, and they cannot be removed without developments in the denuclearization negotiations between North Korea and the U.S. As was the case last year, climate change will lead to continued food shortages, and the pandemic is also likely to continue. Under such circumstances, stagnate relationships with both South Korea and the U.S. will come as a heavy burden.

It is unlikely that North Korea will choose strategic provocation as a move against the South Korea-U.S. Joint Military Exercise. Amid both domestic and international crises, North Korea does not have the resources for a large-scale armed demonstration. In fact, many of its troops are being mobilized for disaster recovery and public construction projects. For North Korea to undertake nuclear tests and mid-to-long range ballistic missile tests would mean the denuclearization talks going under. It is also unlikely for the Biden administration to yield to North Korea's provocations. North Korea has been maintaining a 'voluntary moratorium' since the halting of the North Korea-U.S. Hanoi summit and has been refraining from any strong anti-U.S. provocations.

With the transition to hostile relations between North and South Korea in June of 2020, North Korea has alerted and conducted the blocking of the Inter-Korean Communications Hotline and the demolition of the Inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office. Afterward, the General Staff of the Korean People's Army forewarned the following four military actions: dispatching a regimental unit and a firepower unit to the Mount

Kumgang Tourist Region Kaesong Industrial Complex, readvancing a civilian post to the Demilitarized Zone, escalating the frontal boundary guard to level one, and guaranteeing the dissemination of anti-South Korean leaflets. On March 15, Deputy Director Kim has put out a statement criticizing South Korea-U.S. Joint Military Exercise and warned about abolishing institutions related to the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea and the Mount Kumgang International Tourism Bureau. However, both Deputy Director Kim Yo-jong and the Head of Department Kim Yong-chol's statements on August 10 and 11 differ from those released in the past in that they do not specify future action steps.

Considering their pushback, North Korea may engage in some kind of demonstrative action. After the end of the South Korea-U.S. Joint Military Exercise, North Korea has launched two short-range ballistic missiles. It is likely to behave similarly this time. Also, Kim Jong-un's orders from the 8th Congress of the WPK to actively develop strategic nuclear weapons may imply a forthcoming demonstration in this area. North Korea may also carry out the four military actions and breach the Inter-Korean Military Agreement, both of which were put to a pause by Chairman Kim last June. In addition, Deputy Director Kim Yo-jong's warnings about the abolishing of the organization on South Korean issues may come true.

Nevertheless, there will be pressure on the North Korean part in carrying the abovementioned procedures out. North Korea needs improved North Korea-U.S. relations, and South Korea plays an important role in providing aids to North Korea and in North Korea-U.S. denuclearization negotiations, so a complete stagnation is undesirable. Hence, North Korea's reaction to South Korea-U.S. Joint Military Exercise will likely end up in the form of mid-to-low intensity demonstrations of force or

anti-South Korean activities. However, the likelihood of North Korea's strategic provocation will rise without a breakthrough in the stagnant conditions surrounding the Korean Peninsula. If not resolved by the end of the year, the responsibility for the resumption of the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula will be handed over to the next South Korean administration, and this is not a desirable scenario for urgent-minded North Korea.

Potential Countermeasures

South Korea must prevent further complications and stabilize the conditions surrounding the Korean Peninsula while pushing for the reoperation of the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula. While North Korea is retaliating the South Korea-U.S. Joint Military Exercise, it is also maintaining a 'strong against strong, good against good' stance. In other words, North Korea is likely willing to negotiate if guaranteed adequate justifications and gains. As for now, the most optimistic scenario is to follow the 'Inter-Korean Summit ► North Korea-U.S. working-level talks ► North Korea-U.S. Summit' process, and realizing the process requires South Korea's effort.

First, South Korea should normalize the communications line to resume working-level discussions and focus on achieving an early Inter-Korean Summit -- a virtual one amid the pandemic. Since the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula has been put to the table at the tripartite summit, a top-down solution should be devised. Inter-Korean talks can be the most efficient breakthrough for resuming the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula, and the two parties should reconfirm the validity of the initial tripartite agreement and gain traction for developing

inter-Korean and North Korea-U.S. relations.

A 'humanitarian aid package' consisted of food aid, healthcare aid, and separated family reunions could be considered as an agenda for the Inter-Korean summit. The humanitarian crisis in North Korea is very dire, and the international community, along with the United States, is increasingly sympathizing with the issue's urgency. Also, South Korea should take advantage of the reality that, due to the pandemic, a virtual reunion is more likely than an in-person one; a virtual reunion will be less burdensome for North Korea. President Biden also promised the reunion of Korean Americans, making the reunion issue a highly salient one.

Ultimately, the Inter-Korean summit should provide a breakthrough for North Korea-U.S. relations and drive the resumption of North Korea-U.S. working-level talks. Since President Trump and Chairman Kim's failure to agree was rooted in their unwavering opinions, working-level talks are ever more important. The likelihood of an early agreement is more likely since President Biden is open to conducting small deal-related summit reducing the nuclear capacity of North Korea. Specifically, there should be a negotiation over the implementation of the destruction of the Yongbyon Nuclear Facility. In an interview with 38 North on April 30, Siegfried Hecker, a Senior Researcher at Stanford's Center for International Security and Cooperation, emphasize the importance of the Yongbyon Nuclear Facility and dismissed the claims about its deterioration. The U.K.'s International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and Russia's Center for Energy and Security Studies published a joint report on July 14 that predicted a maximum of 80% reduction in North Korea's nuclear weapon producing capacities if the negotiation for the destruction of the Yongbyon Nuclear Facility went through. Efforts should be poured on pushing through the destruction

of the Yongbyon Nuclear Facility, reducing North Korea's nuclear capacities, and leading to a step-by-step procedure toward complete denuclearization.

North Korea needs to negotiate to alleviate its complex crisis, and the U.S. wants to resolve North Korea's nuclear issue. Since both parties lack trust, South Korea's role has become increasingly important. Denuclearization in North Korea is a long and complex process, and inter-Korean relations possess various structural instabilities despite the accomplishments to date. Hence, the current administration's role now is to make the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula irreversible. It should focus on securing sustainability in the Peace Process on the Korean Peninsula by setting firm grounds for the development of inter-Korean and North Korea-U.S. relations. ©KINU 2021

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