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North Korea's Consecutive Missile Launches and 'Thick Peace'

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A series of missile launches, first announced through North Korea's policy-making bodies of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) and conducted by the Kim Jong-un regime around the beginning of the new year, aim to maximize the development of North Korea's nuclear missiles. This indicates that North Korea now prioritizes strengthening the military power over negotiations, utilizing external circumstances, such as the US-China hegemonic competition, COVID-19, and South Korea's upcoming presidential election. Amid the toughening international sanctions imposed on North Korea, the prospects for nuclear negotiations remain uncertain. Improving inter-Korean relations appears to be challenging as well. Therefore, the peace process of the Korean Peninsula must be reorganized with more long-term perspective. Now is the time to come up with a two-track North Korea policy: on the one hand, pursuing a negotiation for phased denuclearization and arms control; and on the other hand, promoting international cooperation that will improve the quality of North Korean people's life by engaging in its social and economic development measures.

Kim Jong-un Regime's Relentless Pursuit of Missile Developments

At the end of December 2021, Nuclear Threat Initiative, an NGO in the US, announced that the Kim Jong-un regime test-launched missiles (including failed attempts) 129 times, the number dominantly higher than the Kim Il-sung era (15 times) and the Kim Jong-il era (16 times). Staring with a series of 'Unha' long-range rockets, the Kim Jong-un regime has developed roughly 20 missiles, including intermediate-range ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, improved short-range missiles, and hypersonic ballistic missiles. The Kim Jong-un regime's missile pursuit is well demonstrated by the test-launches of hypersonic ballistic missiles at the beginning of 2022 (January 5 and 11) and the short-range ballistic missiles (January 14 and 17). North Korea is now well-positioned to implement a more flexible military strategy, equipped with various missile capabilities in launching-techniques, flight range, and explosive power. General Secretary Kim Jong-un witnessed the test-launch of a hypersonic ballistic missile on January 11, 2022. Test-launch of railway-launched missiles is reportedly part of establishing a "railway-launched missile system" (*Rodong Sinmun*, January 15). South Korean media evaluated that North Korea's four missile test-launches early this year¹⁾ were aimed for domestic political or negotiation purposes. However, it would make more sense first to analyze the military-strategic meaning of missile tests, which had been significantly improved since the Kim Jong-un regime came into power.

Kim Jong-un stated at the 8th Party Congress on January 2021 that North Korea has "made a phenomenal achievement in completing a state nuclear force and brought significant changes in strengthening the state defense power" over the last decade since he took power and that "the US's hostile policy toward the DPRK has even more aggravated rather than being weakened." He went on to proclaim the "revolutionary position on continuing to bolster the state defense power" (Korean Central News Agency [KCNA], January 9, 2022). Detailed measures were announced

1) It was four launches by the time the Korean version of this article was published but five days later on January 25, 2022, North Korea launched two more short-range missiles.

as part of major tasks of the 'five-year plan for developing the defense power,' involving the development of hypersonic missiles, extra-large nuclear warheads, solid-fueled ICBM, nuclear-powered submarines, underwater strategic nuclear weapons, and unmanned surveillance vehicles. He said that sophistication and modernization of the military force would be achieved through those efforts. Such military and security policies follow their own goals and due process instead of being used for domestic political or negotiation purposes. In particular, the test-launch of advanced missiles in January is a barometer to predict where North Korea is headed. That will eventually lead to the actual deployment of missiles with nuclear mounted on all the warheads. North Korea will not be budged by internal and external circumstances to achieve its priorities, such as securing the consecutive and surprise attack capability and the second retaliation capability. North Korean regime already predicts the continuation of endless hostilities with the US and the uncertain geopolitical structure in Northeast Asia. Therefore, they stick to possessing nuclear missiles as a reliable leverage against those possibilities. At the 4th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) held on December 27~31, 2021, Kim Jong-un remarked that the "increasingly unstable military environment surrounding the Chosun (Korean) Peninsula and the international circumstances require the DPRK to relentlessly bolster the state defense power without hesitation." In line with that guidelines, the 6th Politburo meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the WPK held early January this year with Kim Jong-un in attendance concluded that "an order was given to all the units to promptly examine how to re-evaluate trust-building measures initiated and actively implemented by North Korea and restart all the halted activities" (KCNA, January 20, 2022). North Korea's state media *Rodong Sinmun* (January 4, 2022) stated that strengthening the state defense power falls into a category of the "struggle for safeguarding our people and upholding the institutions" in connection with the emergency preventive project and the struggle against anti/non-socialism.

The impetus to Complete Nuclear Missile and Unstable Regional Circumstances

North Korean state media reported that "a series of tactical direction was given and fundamental issues were addressed to be upheld in inter-Korean relations and external projects" at the 4th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the WPK but no details have been released. North Korea appears to make a move in response to other party's behaviors based on the established principles and the proclaimed primary direction. Such principles include ① respecting sovereignty and ② 'responding to power with power and goodwill with goodwill.' The basic direction is to ① build peace by boosting the war deterrence, and ② choose either dialogue or confrontation depending on whether the other party respects North Korea's sovereignty. At the 8th Party Congress, Kim Jong-un said, "the DPRK will not attempt to use nuclear weapons as a responsible nuclear power unless hostile and aggressive force targets us with their nuclear weapons first." That statement presupposes North Korea's nuclear possession deviated from the previous stance of "complete denuclearization." North Korea test-launched two rounds of additional missiles in response to the US's announcement of further sanctions on North Korea's test-launch of hypersonic missiles. This move indicates that North Korea intentionally created the conditions of responding to power with power. North Korea seems to fully tap into unintended opportunities in boosting their nuclear missile capability created by the prolonged COVID-19, uncertain international relations, and South Korea's upcoming presidential election. The 6th Politburo meeting held in early January even mentioned the possible nuclear-testing or test-launch of long-range ballistic missiles.

North Korea is likely to possess essential weapons over the next five years, as revealed by Kim Jong-un at the 8th Party Congress, hinting that security policy precedes foreign policy. Under such circumstances, we will likely see the continuation of the sanctions regime imposed against North Korea, instability surrounding the Korean Peninsula, a low possibility for inter-Korean/US-DPRK dialogue, and possible Russia-China-North Korea trilateral cooperation. These predictions point to contradictions (inevitability and limitations) of pressure-oriented

North Korea policy. The Kim Jong-un regime will attempt to govern the country for as long as possible by focusing on economic development. As witnessed in 2018, it is also possible that North Korea may suspend military provocations and come out to the dialogue once they judge that proper conditions have been created. However, the negotiation conditions will become even stricter than now.

'Thick Peace' as Policy Alternatives

Given North Korea's positions stated above and the regional security circumstances, North Korea policy needs to adopt a new direction, which makes up for the existing nuclear-oriented, top-down approach. I would argue for 'thick peace' as a new direction forward. Thick peace is a combination of the notion of 'solid peace' and 'bulky peace.' The former refers to peace earned through a traditional security policy. A new notion of thick peace argues for extending the range of solid peace. Establishing a deterrence strategy seems inevitable in response to North Korea's nuclear missile development. The ROK-US alliance should be strengthened as an extension of such posture, and diplomacy toward Russia and China should be actively pursued. Solid security policy includes denuclearization, but a phased approach is required to divide goals into mid-term and final goals. At the same time, a parallel approach should be implemented that promotes arms control, such as the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain and militarily guarantees inter-Korean exchange and cooperation. Inter-Korean or US-North Korea two-track dialogue is also a possibility to implement such policies.

Second, thick peace presupposes the parallel implementation of North Korea policy not in sync with denuclearization progress amidst harsh security circumstances. Such a stance will help improve the quality of life for North Korean residents. Moreover, implementation measures should be more flexible. In 2021, North Korea submitted a Voluntary National Review (VNR) regarding the implementation of Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) and sought cooperation with China and Russia. Before that submission, North Korea submitted UNHRC's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) three times (2009, 2014, 2019), promoting cooperation with the international community in a wide range of areas. North Korean regime shows clear will for international collaboration to promote economic and social development, albeit at a slow pace, under the prolonged pandemic and sanctions. The Republic of Korea (ROK) needs to brace for the possible inter-Korean cooperation and at the same time engage in international organizations, who have maintained cooperative relations with North Korea, to offer more human resources, funding, and technical support. North Korea has maintained cooperation with the international community in health care and medical sectors, tourism, and humanitarian assistance, all subject to exemption from sanctions. Direct collaboration is most likely to occur in those areas once the pandemic alleviates. Such an approach will contribute to building inter-Korean trust, expanding the range of inter-Korean cooperation, thereby creating peace on the Korean Peninsula.

North Korea policy in the future should have a larger framework and be comprehensively implemented with security peace policy on the one hand and the humanitarian-development policy on the other hand. Rather than setting a priority, the two must be coordinated. Denuclearization policy should continue to be in place, but one should forgo the attitude of sticking only to North Korea's denuclearization. We should sternly evaluate what recently resumed trade between North Korea and China means despite North Korea's recent missile test-launches. It is time to develop a comprehensive and flexible North Korea policy that seeks to create synergy effects between a series of relevant policies under the supreme goal of harboring peace on the Korean Peninsula and improving the quality of North Korean people's life. The current situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula dictates that a peace process should be approached with the bigger picture and a more realistic perspective. ©KINU 2022

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