



Online Series

2022. 01. 27. | CO 22-04

Intentions and Prospects of North Korea's Announcement of Considering a Rollback of Trust-building Measures toward the US

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In January 2022, North Korea revealed a new policy direction toward the US at a Politburo Meeting of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), namely, completely reconsidering trust-building measures toward the US, which indicates a possible resumption of long-range ballistic missiles and nuclear testing, taking an issue at the US's hostile policy on North Korea. As North Korea hinted a turnaround of its policy to an aggressive tone to weather through current challenges precipitated by the prolonged impasse of the DPRK-US relations and international sanctions, this marks a make-or-break moment in the situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula. Now is the time to come up with a creative alternative to find a breakthrough in the peace process of the Korean Peninsula and fill the vacuum of the transitional period after the presidential election in the Republic of Korea (ROK).

North Korea held the 8th Central Party Committee's 6th Politburo Meeting on January 19, 2022, and announced a new stance on the DPRK-US relations. North Korea argued that it has made 'sincere efforts to mitigate the situation of the Korean Peninsula after the US-North Korea summit and that the US's hostile policy and military threats toward North Korea have reached a dangerous level. North Korea claimed that the US threatened the safety of North Korea with hundredth times of

joint military exercises, various strategic weapons-testing, and the deployment of state-of-the-art weapons. The DPRK also pointed out roughly twenty times of unilateral sanctions imposed on North Korea.

North Korea viewed that it should take actions to safeguard the 'dignity, sovereignty, and national interests' and be prepared for prolonged confrontations with the US. North Korea's actions can be divided into two dimensions: 'giving an order to implement defense policy projects' and 'fully reconsidering the rollback of trust-building measures and resuming all the halted activities.'

The Politburo Meeting stressed that North Korea gave an order to implement national defense policy projects to counter the US's hostile policy. National defense policy projects are referred to as 'overarching initiatives' and 'strategic tasks' discussed at the 8th Party Congress held on January 2021. 'Overarching initiatives' are related to nuclear sophistication, such as miniaturization, lightweighting, and tactical weaponization of nuclear weapons, production of extra-large nuclear warheads, improving an accuracy rate of 15,000km, and enhancing the preemptive nuclear strike ability and retaliation capability. 'Significant strategic tasks' include hypersonic missiles, underwater/ground solid-fueled intercontinental ballistic missiles, nuclear submarine, underwater strategic nuclear weapons, military reconnaissance satellites, and unmanned surveillance vehicle. Since the 8th Party Congress, North Korea has implemented decisions one by one by launching short-range projectiles, SLBM, and hypersonic missiles. 'Giving an order' of implementing national defense policy projects is interpreted as North Korea intending to respond to the US's pressure and strengthen related military actions in the future by readjusting the priorities discussed at the 8th Party Congress.

The Politburo Meeting ordered a unit in question to promptly review how to 'fully reconsider the trust-building measures and resume all the halted activities.' 'Trust-building measures' and 'halted activities' are referred to as the decisions of the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea held in April 2018. The Plenary Meeting mentioned in writing that North Korea will 'suspend nuclear testing and the test-launching of intercontinental ballistic rockets,'

'dismantle the nuclear test site in the northern region' and 'ban the transfer of nuclear weapons and nuclear technology.' It was North Korea's voluntary moratorium that promised the suspension of nuclear testing and ICBM launches, which had been abided by North Korea thus far. It was the first time North Korea mentioned the possibility of withdrawing from the moratorium since April 2018.

Chairman Kim Jong-un and the former US president Trump had two summits and one summit in Panmunjom but failed to bear the fruits. The US-DPRK negotiations have been at an impasse for a year since the Biden administration took office. Sanctions imposed on North Korea have aggravated the difficulties facing North Korea. The 8th Central Party Committee's 4th Plenary Meeting in December 2021 mentioned challenges currently facing North Korea. The Plenary Meeting defined the year 2021 as a juncture that made a 'significant victory,' boasting about the achievements in the agricultural sector. It announced resolving 'issues of food, clothing, and shelter' and agricultural issues as major tasks to be addressed in 2022. Chairman Kim Jong-un directly promised to construct 10,000 residential buildings (*Salimjip*) in Pyongyang's Sonsin and Songhwa districts, build around 800 "terraced apartments" along the Pothong River section of Pyongyang, and 5,000 *Salimjips* in the Komdok area of South Hamgyong in 2021 but no ground-breaking ceremony took place last year. In particular, Kim Il-sung's presidential residence is located in the residential areas along the Pothong River. Moreover, Chairman Kim Jong-un visited the construction site three times and ordered the Party Central Committee to take charge in the construction directly but none of those projects had been completed.

North Korea's economy has already reached a critical point due to the prolonged sanctions and the coronavirus-induced border blockade. The Kim Jong-un regime has thus far not shown new vision to its people. The 8th Central Party Committee's 6th Politburo Meeting was meant to intensively pressure the US to weather through the current mounting challenges by using a card of resuming nuclear-testing and ICBM launches.

■ Prospects of North Korea's Next Move

Despite the hosting of this Politburo Meeting, North Korea is highly unlikely to immediately proceed with the nuclear testing and the ICBM launch as they proclaimed. The Politburo Meeting did not decide whether to fully consider the rollback of trust-building measures and the resumption of suspended activities voluntarily initiated by North Korea but merely "ordered to promptly review these issues" to the unit in question. This means a review is currently underway.

North Korea appears to up the pressure toward the US in phases and is likely to implement a strategy in the following order: ► maintain the current level, ► employ a grey zone strategy, and ► cross the redline. For the time being, North Korea is likely to put in place the low- and mid-level armed provocations, such as launching short-range projectiles and increasing nuclear materials to maintain the status quo, thereby pressuring both the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the US. Although developing short-range missiles and improving nuclear materials are related to developing tactical nuclear weapons as directed by Chairman Kim Jong-un, it does not accompany additional UN sanctions. Such a movement has its limits for North Korea to make a breakthrough in the current situation or pressure the US.

A second most likely scenario would be a grey zone strategy. It refers to a strategy of pressuring the ROK and the US within the boundary of not crossing the redline and includes launching mid-range ballistic missiles and SLBM, restoring Punggye-ri nuclear test site, and reoperating Dongchang-ri missile site. If mid-range ballistic missiles are launched in a short range, it will not subject to UN Security Council (UNSC) 's sanctions. Restoring dismantled Punggye-ri nuclear test site hints North Korea's intention to resume nuclear tests. Normalizing the Dongchang-ri missile site, albeit related to ICBM technology development, is also not directly subject to UNSC sanctions. North Korea could launch satellites as it heralded "operating military reconnaissance satellites soon" to strengthen military power as proclaimed at the 8th Party Congress. It deserves the attention that hypersonic missiles have been launched three times since last September as North Korea announced to do so. North

Korea may launch satellites around April 15, marking the 110th anniversary of Day of the Sun (the birth anniversary of Kim Il-sung, Eternal President of North Korea) given the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing and Paralympics and the ROK-US joint military drills in March.

If North Korea does not achieve its intended goals, the North could cross the redline of resuming nuclear testing and ICBM launches. If North Korea turns to the last resort, crossing the redline, the US will not condone it, which forces Washington to choose either dialogue or confrontation. If North Korea does cross the redline, it will draw the attention of the US and the international community. Under such a scenario, the foundation of the peace process of the Korean Peninsula will be threatened, and resolving issues through negotiations will become a pipe dream. As the ROK eventually will have to bear the burden of high costs, efforts are required to prevent such a scenario from becoming a reality.

■ Directions Forward

The year 2022 will become a make-or-break moment for the peace process of the Korean Peninsula, which could potentially be hindered by all three parties involved, South Korea, North Korea, and the US. The effects of sanctions imposed on North Korea are prevalent in every sector of North Korea, with a sense of accumulated fatigue running rampant. Unless fundamental issues, lifting sanctions and improving the DPRK-US relations, are resolved, North Korea's doctrine of self-reliance (*Charkyok Kaengsaeng*) will only do so much, possibly aggravating North Korea's economic crisis. The Kim Jong-un regime cannot guarantee a bright future for its residents with a highly closed economy and social control in the name of the struggle against anti- and non-socialist practices. Although North Korea has sought to turnaround the current situation via coercive measures after having reached a critical point, the results remain bleak.

The ROK does not have much room to gain the momentum to kick start the inter-Korean relations given the current presidential election season and the

transitional period afterward. It became highly unlikely to utilize the Winter Olympics in Beijing as an opportunity to promote peace on the Korean Peninsula with the next president coming into office in South Korea in March. In this transitional period, earning the impetus to implement North Korea policy is a challenging task. Given the limitations of the transitional period, it is not easy for the next ROK administration to become engrossed in inter-Korean relations.

Into a year since Biden took office, North Korea-US denuclearization negotiations are going nowhere. Biden administration's diplomacy and dialogue-oriented Calibrated Practical Approach appears to usher in the 'season 2 of yet another strategic patience.' With a falling approval rating, the Biden administration faces the upcoming mid-term election with mounting tasks of COVID-19 prevention measures, economic stimulus, and resolving the situation in Ukraine. Chinese President Xi Jinping faces a significant challenge of establishing the consecutive three-term on its president this year.

It is vital to gain the momentum of kick-starting the Korean Peninsula's peace process before North Korea crosses the redline and find a way to turn the current crisis into an opportunity. North Korea appears to want to weather through the current situation by inducing the US to the negotiating table, not to walk on an aggressive path. North Korea's coherent stance is a withdrawal of the US's hostile policy and the double standard, hinting that it could come to the negotiating table if actual benefits and justifiable reasons are guaranteed. Now, the ROK's roles are once again becoming increasingly important. The ROK should effectively utilize the remaining terms of office of President Moon and opportunities created by the transitional period.

The Moon Jae-in administration should focus on creating an entry of the Korean Peninsula peace process while stably maintaining the current situation. To that end, a creative alternative should be devised going beyond the end-of-the-war initiatives. It is necessary to consider hosting an unconventional online inter-Korean summit and providing desperately-needed vaccines to North Korea on a massive scale. Another option to consider is to delay the ROK-US joint military drill to a later time

given the timing of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and Paralympics and ROK's presidential election. It is worth considering a way to utilize the already established proposal of permanent dismantlement of Yongbyon nuclear facilities and North Korea-US summit channels, which were created by Trump and left as Trump's legacy. The permanent dismantlement of Yongbyon nuclear facilities, proposed by North Korea, conforms to Biden administration's Calibrated Practical Approach. President Biden also mentioned that he could sit down with Chairman Kim Jong-un in the process of permanently dismantling Yongbyon nuclear facilities. It is time to actively consider drawing up early, practical agreements between North Korea and the US, revisiting what was discussed in Hanoi.

The upcoming ROK administration will be confronted with complex challenges at the beginning of its terms, such as overcoming COVID-19, and promoting economic stimulus, and national integration. If tensions on the Korean Peninsula escalate, it will place an increasing burden on the new administration. The upcoming ROK administration should be seamlessly prepared for the peace process of the Korean Peninsula and implement related policy in earnest. A cooperative, organic structure should be created centering around the possible peace process of the Korean Peninsula between the current administration and the next administration.

It is important to remember that crossing the redline is not the way to go for North Korea but a 'worst decision made after long contemplation' that will only heighten the complex crisis. The Kim Jong-un regime should realize that delivering a promise of implementing the policy of all-out concentration on economic-building and 'serving the people as if serving the heaven' will only come about, not through nuclear crisis, but through denuclearization. ©KINU 2022

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