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Significance of the ROK-U.S. Nuclear Consultative Group and North Korea's Perception

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This paper assesses that the establishment of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) demonstrates the ROK-U.S. alliance's resolute willingness to deter North Korea, as well as the evolution of "tailored extended deterrence" on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's sensitive response to the NCG reflects its perception regarding the high possibility of the NCG's implementation, which could result in the North's "strategic loss." North Korea will be particularly interested in the following issues: the deployment level of U.S. strategic assets; the potential for a greater role of ROK in strengthening extended deterrence; the possible linkage between the NCG and ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation; and the possibility of ongoing U.S. engagement in North Korean issue. In this regard, it is imperative for South Korea to prioritize the strengthening of the extended deterrence, emphasizing the role and value of the alliance, and promptly institutionalizing the NCG for effective operations through diplomatic efforts toward the U.S. In parallel, the ROK government should develop delicate and long-term strategy to implement the Audacious Initiative and take a more active stance in nuclear diplomacy toward the Indo-Pacific region and the international community.

The Inaugural Meeting of the NCG and Its Implications

The inaugural meeting of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) took place in Seoul

on July 18, 2023, following the Washington Declaration. This meeting can be assessed in terms of its significance, formality, and content. First of all, the ROK and the U.S. emphatically conveyed, through a joint press release that the NCG would serve as a mechanism to enhance a combined deterrence and response posture between two nations. Notably, the declaration underscored that “the U.S. commitment to provide extended deterrence to the ROK is backed by the full range of U.S. capabilities, including nuclear,” signifying the U.S. intent to substantiate its capabilities through “actions” beyond words. By reiterating the phrase “the end of the regime,” the ROK reaffirmed its strong willingness to deter North Korea.¹⁾ Additionally, discussions revolved around enhancing the visibility of the strategic asset deployment, with the arrival of the USS Kentucky (SSBN 737), a nuclear-powered submarine, at a port in Busan. The agreement and the progress of the U.S. strategic asset encompass a range of possible scenarios surrounding the Korean Peninsula, accommodating diverse sizes and formations from individual deployment to collaborative work with the conventional power of Army, Navy and the Air Force. The U.S. strategic assets could be deployed from routine to constant deployment depending on the intensity of the North’s provocations. Improved visibility of the U.S. strategic assets offers a dual advantages—clear military-strategic signaling to North Korea and enhanced security assurance for the ROK.

Both the ROK and the U.S. share clear interests in terms of the formality of the NCG. The meeting included about 30 participants from the Office of National Security from the ROK, and the U.S. National Security Council (NSC), as well as Defense and Foreign Affairs ministries, and military authorities. The parties agreed to present their progress and follow-up measures to their respective presidents in a few months and announced plans for quarterly meetings, along with an additional high-level discussion in the U.S. toward the end of 2023. The outcome of this initial meeting signals close coordination between the two nations, ranging from working-level to high-level

1) Both South Korea and the U.S. initially took the expression of “the end of its regime,” mentioned in the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, in a joint statement of the 54th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting in November, 2022.

meetings, indicating a tendency toward the institutionalization and regularization of the NCG.

In the case of content, the joint press included “(1) the development of security and information-sharing protocols, (2) nuclear consultation and communication processes in crises and contingencies, and (3) coordination and development of relevant planning, operations, exercises, simulations, trainings, and investment activities.”²⁾ Regardless of the limited comments, it appears that both countries agree to establish a core framework combined with information sharing, communication system, and practical approaches for military exercises to enhance executive capability of extended deterrence. Concrete initiatives, such as planning and capacity-building endeavors between the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command and forthcoming Strategic Command (scheduled for establishment in 2024) of the ROK, alongside a tabletop exercise with the U.S. Strategic Command, are in the pipeline. If the agreed agenda is performed faithfully, the NCG will advance into an effective mechanism with a high level of extended deterrence.

In essence, the establishment of the NCG signifies the tangible progress of “tailored extended deterrence” for the Korean Peninsula. However, this does not necessarily imply a consensus on the effectiveness of the NCG domestically. There are arguments suggesting that the practicality and cooperation level might differ from the substance and operation of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). The history and experience of the NPG since 1966, could give lessons and implications for the NCG's future. However, a direct comparison between the NCG and the NPG reveals limitations in content, considering their distinct focuses on addressing different threats. Some claim that the ROK renounced a nuclear armament option by committing to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in the Washington Declaration. Yet, this claim requires stronger grounds, as Article 10.1 of the NPT grants a “right to withdraw from the treaty” if the withdrawing party deems that exceptional events, in relation to the treaty's subject matter, have “jeopardized the supreme interests of its country.”³⁾ For

²⁾ The U.S.-ROK Joint Press Release on Nuclear Consultative Group. Office of the President (July 18, 2023)

the ROK government, it is a realistic option to assert that reinforcing extended deterrence, particularly given its policy emphasis on North Korea's denuclearization. Simultaneously, the NCG's operation stands as the most viable alternative within the current context of the Korean Peninsula, serving as a means to concretize North Korea's denuclearization. A strategic approach to validate the NCG's effectiveness and gain public trust involves promptly developing and implementing the NCG's substance.

North Korea's Perception and Its Prospects

In response to the establishment of the NCG, North Korea has shown sensitive reactions, issuing a series of statements while continuing missile tests, thereby escalating tensions. These actions shed light on North Korea's perception of the NCG. North Korea holds the view that the enhanced extended deterrence from the ROK-U.S. alliance could transcend mere written declarations. Should this development be fully achieved, North Korea contends that it could result in a "strategic loss." In this sense, the prospects of North Korea's future responses and core interests related to the extended deterrence and the NCG will give profound implications on the North Korean policy by the ROK and the U.S.

First, North Korea is uncomfortable about the deployment and the presence of the U.S. strategic assets, which adds visibility to the Korean Peninsula.⁴⁾ The fact that North Korea argues such arrangement is compatible with "conditions to use nuclear weapons" helps us get a better understanding of how it thinks about the deployment of the nuclear-powered submarine by the U.S. at a port in Busan. Past instances also reveal North Korea's perception of threat, notably when North Korea adopted a "quasi-war" or heightened "military posture" in response to ROK-U.S. combined

³⁾ United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)," <<https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/nuclear/npt/text>> (Accessed July 20, 2023).

⁴⁾ Statement by DPRK Defense Minister Kang Sun-nam, The Korean Central News Agency. (July 20, 2023)

military drills featuring strategic assets.⁵⁾ As a result, the deployment of U.S. strategic assets routinely or on a regular basis, keeps North Korea on edge. This heightened tension bears significant internal consequences for both troops and residents, in particular who find themselves involuntarily mobilized with the military apparatus while pursuing their economic and daily lives, essentially placing the entire nation on alert. If this situation lingers, the persistent strain and the accumulating exhaustion could foster discontent with the regime. Considering the external environment, the potential military coordination with the ROK and Japan alongside the deployment of U.S. strategic assets will possibly fortify the alliance network, thereby increasing the burden on the North. Believing that the NCG holds the potential to exert negative influence on Pyongyang, both internally and externally, adopting an offensive response against further NCG activities becomes a strategic option to counteract such repercussions.

Second, North Korea will vigilantly monitor the progression of the strengthening extended deterrence between the ROK and the U.S. with keen focus on the ROK's capacity-building efforts, given the South's relative unfamiliarity with nuclear weapon systems. Should the ROK and the U.S. engage in a tabletop exercise involving a more assertive scenario including North Korean contingency, the North would inevitably assess the intentions of the alliance and the prospects of implementing such actions, thus heightening their caution. With unwavering attention, the North is likely to exploit a situation characterized by intensified nuclear cooperation between the ROK and the U.S. and the ROK's increasing proficiency in the nuclear weapon systems to legitimize the North's development, possession, and even use of nuclear weapons.

Third, the implementation of the NCG and its added elements will undoubtedly pose a dilemma for North Korea. While the NCG operates as a bilateral consultative entity, North Korea's attention is more likely to be directed towards the alliance connecting the NCG with the ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation, which announced its plan

⁵⁾ Washington Declaration: Evolution of the Extended Deterrence, Chung, Sung-Yoon, KINU <<https://www.kinu.or.kr/main/module/report/view.do?idx=114273&nav.code=mail674786581>>, searched on July 23, 2023

to share missile warning data within the year. The North's primary focus will be on the extent and level of trilateral cooperation. In this regards, North Korea may make aggressive statements or provocations both before and after a trilateral talks between the ROK, the U.S., and Japan, scheduled at Camp David on August 18. In addition, North Korea might attempt to manipulate the situation or create the wedge by engaging in separate dialogues with each of the three countries. Recent instances, such as reports of North Korea and Japan engaging in multiple contacts in a third country or a U.S. soldier crossing the border through the Joint Security Area (JSA), underscore North Korea's strategic maneuvering.

Lastly, North Korea might carefully examine the continuity of the U.S. engagement in North Korean issue as well as its commitment on the extended deterrence. Since 2022, North Korea has been showcasing its capabilities to advance nuclear weapons through frequent missile tests involving both low and high-intensity provocations. This strategic display, aimed at gaining a military superiority on the Korean Peninsula, is intended to incapacitate the joint response of the ROK and the U.S. Paradoxically, this approach may inadvertently strengthen the ROK-U.S. extended deterrence mechanism and reinforce security cooperation among the ROK, the U.S. and Japan. North Korea's intent of enhancing the visibility of its nuclear capabilities involves leveraging a delivery system equipped with tactical nuclear warheads. However, the North's effort seems ineffective due to the identification of the majority of its weapon-related data. Considering the political influences and symbolic meaning, the prospect of a seventh nuclear test by North Korea remains possible. However, the symbolic significance associated with a nuclear test might not only burden China and Russia—both implicit supportive of North Korea—but also mobilize the international community against the North. Moreover, it would further justify the reinforcement of extended deterrence and security collaboration among the ROK, the U.S., and Japan.

Policy Considerations

Regarding the policy considerations, first, it is essential for the ROK government to consistently emphasize that the North Korean nuclear issue is closely linked not only

with the U.S. nuclear and nonproliferation policy but also with its broader diplomatic and security strategies, including its Indo-Pacific strategy. While the U.S. takes new approach in nuclear operations through the NCG, its effectiveness relies on the execution of its principles. On the other hand, the U.S. commitment and engagement in addressing the North Korean issue is bound to strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance. Concurrently, it will encourage the ROK to assume an active role in reshaping the envisioned Indo-Pacific and international order pursued by the U.S. Within the rapidly evolving international dynamics, where the U.S. faces strategic competition with China and Russian invasion in Ukraine loom large, circumstances on the Korean Peninsula have direct and indirect implications. This backdrop acts as an opportunity for the South Korean government to persuasively demonstrate to the U.S. that the North Korean issue is inherently aligned with U.S. national interests, deserving of a consistent and prominent position on its policy agenda.

Second, the U.S. and the ROK should make it a priority to lay out the details of the NCG activities, hold a meeting on a regular basis, and institutionalize the NCG in a speedy manner. The primary measure for assessing the effectiveness of the NCG lies on the process of discussing how to implement follow-up measures through regular meetings and of monitoring everything ranging from consultation to implementation. Since the NCG is expected to be operated as a long-term mechanism for the extended deterrence, the rapid institutionalization and the operation planning with the ROK's participation are prerequisites for the success of the NCG. These preconditions will aid in stable operation and management of the NCG without being affected by changes in policy stance of both countries, including the 2024 presidential election in the U.S.

Third, fostering robust communication between the ROK and the U.S. becomes an impetus in advancing the NCG. The establishment of a communicative channel is critical to facilitate the systematic operation of both the current extended deterrence framework, such as EDSCG, and the NCG. This form of communication is equally critical for achieving coordination and collaboration among the government agencies in both nations. On this matter, the ROK government could consider augmenting the existing communication infrastructure while introducing innovative features to enhance effective coordination and adaptation across related

agencies. This strategic enhancement could encompass entities such as the Office of National Security and ministries of unification, foreign affairs, and defense.

Fourth, the ROK government must consistently emphasize that the strengthening extended deterrence aligns with its the ultimate goal of North Korean policy: the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. North Korea has been focused on declaring itself as a nuclear weapon state at home and abroad, even mentioning a preemptive use of nuclear weapons while seeking political, social, and economic stability through self-rehabilitation and tighter control on its society as well as people. It is critical that the Korean government take a long-term approach as it creates an environment for the Audacious Initiative's 3D (deterrence, dissuasion, and diplomacy), sparing no effort in formulating sub-strategies delicately.

Fifth, the ROK government must take a more proactive approach towards nuclear diplomacy concerning North Korea, promoting the ROK's distinctive role as a global pivotal state for NPT. It is essential to communicate with nations across the Indo-Pacific region and regional bodies like ASEAN, emphasizing that reinforcing extended deterrence and making progress in the North Korean nuclear issue act as important conditions for fostering an enhanced security setting within the region. Moreover, it is necessary for the ROK government to explain to China that the NCG's operations are strategically tailored to deter North Korea. In the Washington Declaration, the U.S. and the ROK emphasized the need for conversation and diplomacy with North Korea without preconditions while pursuing the extended deterrence through the NCG, with a view to achieving the denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula⁶⁾. More important, the two countries should continue to send this message to North Korea. ©KINU 2023

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National reunification (KINU).

6) "Washington Declaration," the President's Office of the Blue House, July 18, 2023 <<https://www.president.go.kr/newsroom/press/C8pBYSLx>>, searched on July 20, 2023