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Analysis of North Korea's Response to the ROK-Japan-China Summit

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The 9th ROK-Japan-China Summit, held on May 27 in Seoul, was a highly significant meeting in several respects. First, it was notable for being held after a hiatus of 4 years and 5 months, demonstrating renewed cooperation among the three countries. Second, the areas of cooperation discussed were extremely broad. Third, the summit made significant progress in institutionalizing cooperation among the three countries. In terms of security cooperation, the summit addressed key issues of mutual concern, including regional peace, the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and the issue of abductions.

However, there remained significant differences among the three countries regarding the core issue of North Korea's denuclearization, which is central to South Korea's security. The leaders of South Korea and Japan directly mentioned North Korea's denuclearization and its provocative satellite launches. President Yoon Suk-yeol emphasized that "the international community must respond firmly to any launches using ballistic missile technology." Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida expressed his support for President Yoon's stance. In contrast, Chinese Premier Li Qiang stated that "relevant parties should exercise restraint and prevent the situation from worsening and becoming more complicated." Premier Li did not use the phrase "make efforts towards the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," a term

China had agreed to in the previous summit.

North Korea responded immediately to the ROK–Japan–China Summit. As part of its diplomatic response, North Korea issued a statement from its Ministry of Foreign Affairs on May 27 . The statement asserted, “Regarding the grave political provocation that denies the constitutional status of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) at an international conference led by South Korea, we regard this as a direct challenge to our country’s sovereignty and a violent interference in our internal affairs, and we strongly condemn and reject it.” The statement further declared, “The ‘complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula’ is, theoretically and practically, and physically, already dead.” Such uncompromising stance on the nuclear issue aims to send a clear message to China as well. The Kim Jong–un regime justifies its nuclear armament by invoking principles of traditional international order, such as the equality of sovereignty and non–interference in internal affairs. Additionally, as a military response, North Korea launched a military reconnaissance satellite on the night of 27. However, the attempt failed as the first stage of the rocket exploded mid–air shortly after the launch. North Korea’s attempt to launch a military reconnaissance satellite appears to be an effort to disrupt the atmosphere of comprehensive regional cooperation among South Korea, Japan, and China, and to create divisions among the three countries.

South Korea must further develop the trilateral cooperation established at the ROK–Japan–China Summit to positively impact both the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and regional stability and prosperity. In particular, leveraging the momentum of cooperation with China will be crucial to garnering China’s support for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. As a current member of the United Nations Security Council, South Korea will assume the role of chair in June. This opportunity, along with the recently agreed–upon regular diplomatic and security communication channels between South Korea and China, should be used to enhance communication between the two countries. ©KINU 2024

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