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2024 Two Sessions: Direction of China's Foreign Policy and Implications for the Korean Peninsula

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After Xi Jinping assumed power following the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012, the 12th round of two sessions were concluded on March 11. The National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) are collectively referred to as the "Two Sessions." This article aims to analyze the significance of cross-strait relations and the direction of defense policies based on foreign policies as revealed in major reports and statements during the Two Sessions, and to examine their implications on the Korean peninsula.

First, during the Two Sessions, Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated China's longstanding position on resolving the Korean Peninsula issue. He emphasized the dual-track approach (simultaneous pursuit of denuclearization and a peace treaty), along with step-by-step and simultaneous implementation. He advocated for resuming dialogue and negotiations to address the legitimate security concerns of all relevant parties, especially North Korea, and to advance the political resolution process. The underlying intentions are that since South Korea and the U.S. are responsible for tensions on the Korean Peninsula, pressure and sanctions against North Korea should be suspended, and the U.S. should foster dialogue and

negotiation. China does not raise issues with North Korea's nuclear development or show willingness to enforce UN Security Council resolutions. This represents China's view on the North Korean nuclear issues within the context of competition with the U.S. against the backdrop of worsening China-U.S. relations and blocization trends. It indicates an increasing likelihood of further blocization in the future, prompting South Korea to closely monitor the potential for bilateral relations, such as those between China and North Korea, and China and Russia, to evolve into a strategic China-Russia-North Korea security cooperation. Given China's deep concerns about the strengthening of ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation and South Korea's vigilance regarding the possibility of closer ties between China, Russia, and North Korea, the prospect of improved China-South Korea relations seems remote. A deadlock appears likely to persist for the foreseeable future. However, China has recently announced its intention to promote deeper cooperation between South Korea, China, and Japan, indicating the potential for the realization of a trilateral summit that has been pursued since last year. South Korea needs to strategically leverage this opportunity by urging China to play a complementary role in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue and other related matters.

In terms of major power diplomacy, Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized dialogue and exchanges with the U.S. However, competition and conflict between the U.S. and China are expected to increase across all fields, including politics, economics, trade, and advanced technology. Nevertheless, it is likely that the two countries will abstain from confrontation and prioritize stability for the time being, given the fact that the U.S. Presidential Election is scheduled for November, and that the U.S.-China conflict has a strong potential to impose political burdens on both governments. Regarding China-Russia relations, China stated that it would further strengthen its strategic cooperation with Russia in the future. However, the enhancement of China-Russia relations may pose challenges to China's relationship with the EU and could potentially influence China-North Korea relations and even China-Russia-North Korea relations. Therefore, continuous observation of these developments is warranted.

In terms of China's foreign policy, one of the most noteworthy aspects is its emphasis on global South diplomacy and its relationship with North Korea. In fact, China considers diplomacy with BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and other Global South countries as crucial for expanding its sphere of influence and promoting multipolarity. China has recently reiterated the importance of this policy, recognizing these countries as key players in shaping the international order. China aims to strengthen its anti-U.S. alliance with these countries and challenge the existing U.S.-centered international order by seeking new alternative paths. Meanwhile, North Korea has enhanced its diplomatic efforts towards the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and Global South countries, as evidenced by its participation in the 19th NAM Summit held from January 15 to 20 (local time), and the 3rd South Summit (January 21-22). If China's strategy of strengthening the anti-U.S. alliance and creating a new international order aligns with North Korea's interests, it could lead to the reinforcement of an anti-U.S. coalition. North Korea may seek to exploit this situation to bolster its legitimacy as a nuclear weapons state and further solidify blocization through the anti-U.S. alliance. Therefore, South Korea should closely monitor China and North Korea while maintaining solidarity with friendly nations aligned with the U.S. Simultaneously, South Korea should explore expanding its diplomatic engagements with countries in the Global South.

Meanwhile, China's defense budget revealed for 2024 stood at approximately 1.67 trillion yuan (around KRW 309 trillion), representing a 7.2% increase from the previous year, surpassing 7% for the third consecutive year. This increase comes amidst growing security threats in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, prompting China to prioritize the enhancement of its military capabilities. Additionally, the ongoing Ukraine-Russia War has heightened China's security concerns. The Xi Jinping administration will continue to focus on strengthening its maritime sovereignty, including the capabilities to achieve unification with Taiwan by force, and enhancing defense capabilities against the U.S. As stated in an interview by Yuan Hua Zhi, an Admiral of the People's Liberation Army Navy, regarding the construction of China's fourth nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, China's

reinforcement of its aircraft carrier fleet is likely to result in an expansion of its maritime operational zones, potentially impacting the West Sea of South Korea. Furthermore, China's expansion of maritime sovereignty is connected to the possibility of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait. The Taiwan issue holds significant importance as it can impact not only the U.S. and its ally, South Korea, but also has the potential to involve North Korea. South Korea needs to continuously monitor developments regarding the cross-strait relations, and collaborate with concerned countries, including the U.S., to devise joint response measures. In particular, South Korea should remain vigilant against the possibility of North Korea enhancing maritime activities in the West Sea under the pretext of China's operational activities or even engaging in joint naval exercises with China. Furthermore, in the event of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, South Korea should also remain alert to the potential for miscalculations by North Korea, which could lead to its involvement. Therefore, it is imperative for South Korea to enhance its military capabilities through the ROK-U.S. alliance and strengthen its networks with neighboring countries. ©KINU 2024

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