

## Diplomatic Maneuverings after Choe Ryong-hae's Visit to China

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Choe Ryong-hae's visit to China (May 22-24) indicates a change of phase regarding North Korean issues. The phase of heightened military tension initiated by North Korea would transit into one of antagonistic diplomatic maneuvering. What are the anticipated characteristics and dynamics of such diplomatic maneuvering? A period of deadlock would continue for a foreseeable future, while participating parties taking diplomatic or other measures to create an unfavorable environment for the other parties involved.

### Reactions to Choe's Visit to China

To start, the positions expressed by the states concerned regarding Choe's visit to China will be discussed. Choe Ryong-hae, the Director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army, met with Chinese President Xi Jinping on May 24 and said, "North Korea will resolve problems related to the Korean Peninsula through various forms of dialogue and negotiations, including the Six-Party Talks, and will protect the peace and stability of the Peninsula." In response, President Xi Jinping remarked, "China's position on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is clear, and regardless of the circumstance, the goal of denuclearization must be reached in order to promote peace and stability." On this matter, South Korea Foreign Minister Yun Byung Se said on May 27, "We don't want dialogue for the sake of dialogue. North Korea must show its sincerity by fulfilling its international duties and promises related to North Korea's denuclearization."

Such statements show each state's political and diplomatic assessment regarding North Korea's rocket launch in February 2012, the third nuclear test in February 2013, as well as the escalation of military tensions advanced by North Korea. These remarks suggest possible strategic positions that each state may adopt in future diplomatic maneuverings.

### Prospective Strategic Positions

First, in the case of North Korea, the regime will try to solidify the military gains reaped during the tension-building phase through diplomatic means. Through 'various forms of dialogue and negotiation, including the Six-Party Talks,' it will advance negotiation agenda such as, gaining recognition as a nuclear power, nuclear disarmaments, and building peace systems. As its next best alternative, it may accept a freeze on its nuclear capacity with huge compensation,

China's most desired goal is the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. However, at present, the goal is simply to bring North Korea back to the denuclearization process regardless of the format of talks. China's concern is not necessarily North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons, but has more to do with South Korea and the U.S.' strong response to North Korea's nuclear armament and military escalation, which could ultimately harm Beijing's security interests. Accordingly, China is likely to link the possibility of North Korea's return to the denuclearization process with the possibility of supporting North Korea's future requests regarding South Korea and the U.S.

The prerequisite for meaningful talks and negotiations, as presented by South Korea and the U.S, is that North Korea adopts a authentic and reliable denuclearization process. It indicates that in the very least, North Korea must conform to the agreement made on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012. In other words, North Korea must suspend its nuclear and missile tests, and uranium enrichment, as well as accept IAEA's inspections, in exchange for aid.

### Renewed February 29<sup>th</sup> Agreement as a stopover of strategic deadlock?

When taking into account the different strategic positions, it seems that the North Korean nuclear issue will continue to be in a situation of deadlock due to all participant states' insisting upon "strategic patience." This is because no single state has the means or incentives to significantly change other state's position, even though they are all dissatisfied with the situation, and wish to change it to their favor. Therefore, for the time being, North Korea, China, South Korea and the U.S. will not change their present positions, but will also be unable to change other states' positions in a significant way. Consequently, they will wait for others to change first, while attempting to weaken their positions through displaying "strategic patience."

Such state of deadlock is likely to persist, taking on an unstable form; but there is also the possibility that the states may reach a compromise. The reason why an unstable deadlock is likely to continue is that each state may attempt to weaken other states' positions, further aggravating the instability. Reaching a compromise is a time-consuming task, and considerable instability is likely to appear numerous times.

It is also possible that all states could negotiate an agreement similar to the February 29<sup>th</sup> Agreement in the end. In fact, all the participating states are likely to try and amend the Agreement in each one's favor. In addition to the terms of the February 29<sup>th</sup> Agreement, North Korea will likely attempt to gain tacit recognition as a nuclear state, and hold peace regime talks. China will want to increase its influence over North Korea, as well as re-establish its status through the continuation of the Six-Party Talks. South Korea and the U.S. will want to be guaranteed of North Korea's denuclearization, and see improved inter-Korean relations. Although the strategic intention of "reviving the February 29<sup>th</sup> Agreement" may be different, it could be the greatest common denominator in temporarily stabilizing the deadlock, or the mid-way point before taking the next step.

### Each State's Next Move to Weaken the Positions of the Other Party

The essence of each state's next move during the continuing deadlock is to stick to its current position, and force other states to change their position first, by creating an unfavorable environment. Due to such hostilities, the deadlock could easily fall into a state of instability and disarray, or may even encounter an unexpected ambush.

What is the key point in such maneuvers? North Korea will compete with South Korea and the U.S. to win over China. Unless China is able to constrain North Korea's pursuit of becoming a nuclear state and its dangerous provocations, the U.S. will likely strengthen its military presence in Northeast Asia, as well as the U.S.-ROK alliance, which could significantly damage China's security interests. Accordingly, it seems that China recognizes the need for constraining North Korea's pursuit of possessing nuclear weapons and extreme provocations. In this regard, it appears that China is temporarily strengthening its tactical cooperation with South Korea and the U.S. However, whether this can be developed into a solid form of strategic cooperation is unclear.

As for North Korea, the escalation of military tensions after December 2012 had partly backfired, resulting in an estranged relationship with China. The fact that China has become the target of competition between the North Korea, and the U.S. and South Korea is a very dangerous turn of events for North Korea. Therefore, the most important thing for North Korea is to prevent a South Korea-U.S.-China trilateral cooperative relationship from becoming solidified. It appears this was the main objective of Choe Ryong-hae's visit to China. Moreover, North Korea will focus on taking diplomatic steps to raise mutual mistrust among South Korea, the U.S. and China, and at the very least, play one against the other. Conversely, South Korea's policy objective is to form a consensus and promote cooperation on the U.S, China, and South Korea's North Korea policies. The success or failure will depend on how effectively South Korea and the U.S. can reflect China's strategic interests and concerns regarding North Korea, into their respective policies.

In addition, all states will attempt to create an environment that is disadvantageous to other states. North Korea will aggravate South Korea's internal political divisions regarding its North Korea policy while boasting its increased nuclear and missile capability, as well as its capacity to impose threats against South Korea. The U.S. will take actions to increase the influx of information into North Korea, denounce

its human rights violations, and strengthen financial sanctions. China can call on North Korea to denuclearize through United Nations Security Council resolutions, and financial pressures. In addition, China will request South Korea and the U.S, as well as North Korea to uphold peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and request South Korea and the U.S. to concede in order to resume the Six-Party Talks.

Lastly, Japan's diplomacy towards North Korea is likely to appear as an uncertain factor. Although it did not yield any outcomes, Abe's envoy Iijima visited North Korea (May 14-17). This indicates a fracture in South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation. Japan's conservative right wing party not only conflicts with South Korea and China in the diplomatic domain, but also attempts to obtain an independent diplomatic space in Northeast Asia, away from the influence of the U.S. There are two objectives behind this. The first is to secure domestic political support. The other is to curb other states' pressures on Japan through pursuing an independent process with North Korea. Although the first round of independent diplomacy towards North Korea had failed, the Abe administration is likely to try again.

### Summary and Conclusion

Choe's visit to China shows that North Korea has switched its policy from tension escalating tactics to a diplomatic one. At present, North Korea is facing the outcomes and costs of its tension-escalation policy adopted after December 2012. North Korea is now encountering various and difficult challenges both at home and abroad. Among these, China's increasingly critical attitude is a concern for North Korea. When considering the policy positions of South Korea, the U.S, China and North Korea, it appears that a tedious period of attacks and defense, and ultimately, a period of deadlock will continue. In the meantime, each state will take tactical actions to change the environment to its favor. The mid-way point will probably be the formation of a <2.29 Agreement + a>. However, who obtains the lions share in the extra benefits incurred will be determined by how wisely and effectively each party will maneuver its diplomacy during the phase of deadlock. (First posted in Korean on May 30, 2013). © KINU 2013

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