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Trust-building Process on the Korean Peninsula Continues

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“Golden Time” for North Korea’s Denuclearization and the Inflection Point in South Korea’s Policy Towards Unification and North Korea

Alarmed by North Korea's fourth nuclear test, there are increasing concerns over the fact that the time until North Korea develops the capability and to miniaturize nuclear warheads and deploys them is approaching. In relation to North Korea, there is a fundamental difference between developing nuclear weapons and deploying them. Should North Korea be capable of miniaturizing nuclear warheads, it could carry them on hundreds of Scud and Rodong missiles, which are already deployed, putting the core parts of China and Japan within the range, not to mention South Korea. This situation triggers seismic shifts in the Northeast Asian security landscape and the conditions for Korean unification. Moreover, once the Kim Jong-un regime, which recognizes the nuclear arms as the core means to safeguard the regime, installs the nuclear warheads, it is unlikely to abandon them. This is why the time before North Korea deploys them is referred to as “golden time” for North Korea’s denuclearization.

Seoul opted for the full closure of Gaeseong Industrial Complex along with initiating discussions on the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) with the U.S., and forewarned an additional high level of pressure against the Kim Jong-un regime. President Park Geun-hye's address to the National Assembly on February 16 included the concern on North Korea's prospect of deploying nuclear weapons, as well as the hawkish terms such as North Korea's "regime collapse," or "regime change," let alone the resolute determination for North Korea's denuclearization. This is a deviation from South Korea's policy on unification and North Korea before the fourth nuclear test.

As President Park emphasized in her address, Pyongyang has snubbed its southern neighbor's pursuit of dialogue and cooperation to build confidence between the two Koreas and continued with its nuclear and missile development on top of armed provocations. Based on the perception that North Korea's nuclear and missile threat is drastically escalating, South Korea's shift in policy direction encapsulate the resolve not to miss this "golden time" for North Korea's denuclearization. North Korea's fourth nuclear test marks the important inflection point in Seoul's policy on unification and North Korea.

Enhancing "Trustpolitik" through "Alignment Policy"

Soon before the inauguration of President Park, North Korea launched a rocket in December 2012, and conducted the third nuclear test in March 2013. Given that the Trust-building process on the Korean Peninsula (hereafter, the trust-building process) commenced when these events occurred, it seems unconvincing to state that the circumstances surrounding ROK's North Korea/unification policy have fundamentally reshaped by North Korea's fourth nuclear test, and the rocket launch. The trust-building process consists of two policies: "trustpolitik" and "alignment policy." With the understanding that the lack of trust between the two Koreas is

the biggest problem, the policy to “transform the Korean Peninsula from a zone of conflict into a zone of trust” lies at the core of the trust-building process. Nevertheless, “trustpolitik” does not indicate one-sided concessions or negotiations and the framework is strengthened by “alignment policy” which conveys that North Korea faces strong countermeasures as well as paying a high price for any provocations. This is clearly elaborated in the article, “A New Kind of Korea,” published in *Foreign Affairs*, written by President Park Geun-hye before coming to office.

In the genuine sense, “trustpolitik” does not mean abandoning the untrustworthy counterpart, but rather bringing it to the credible negotiation framework. South Korea should realize that its ultimate goal is unification, beyond the alleviation of North Korean nuclear crisis. The trust-building process is a policy of building trust centered on the two axes, dialogue and pressure. Hence, the current situation corresponds not to the renunciation of the trust-building process as a whole but to the phase of pressuring and enforcing North Korea to sit at the negotiation table through the “alignment policy.” The essence of “alignment policy” is in the resolute response and pressure in order to build trust.

Accordingly, the present circumstances could be described as a switch of policy pivot to alignment policy which urges North Korea to change its course of action, rather than either a fundamental alteration or abandonment of the trust-building process. In other words, the center of gravity in the trust-building process shifted to pressure, — between the two axes, dialogue and pressure — coercing North Korea to change its policy direction. The policy objective of the trust-building process remains as building trust, ultimately aiming at unification.

Need for “Preventive Engagement Policy”

Unification between a dictatorial regime and a democratic regime is virtually impossible. Considering the difference between the two regimes and the fact that the dictatorial regime loses the prerogatives after the unification, the North Korean leadership is unlikely to choose unification by mutual consent. Thus, the North Korean regime change is of essence in the unification process. Alongside regime change, systemic change in North Korea is necessary. The cases such as Somalia, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc. confirm that even if a dictatorial regime collapses, social disorder and high-cost structure take place without solving the fundamental problem, namely, positive change within the system.

It is necessary to take note of the fact that President Park mentioned the North Korean regime change as well as systemic change in the address to the National Assembly. These changes are the underlying premise to achieve unification by agreement between the North and the South and Seoul should seek policies to meet this end. This could be conceptualized as “preventative engagement policy” and encompasses the efforts to induce North Korea to denuclearize and to urge Pyongyang to change its behavior. This is because attempts to build trust and negotiate with the North Korean regime have encountered fundamental impediments. Various measures for fundamental changes within the North Korean regime such as democratization, marketization, improvement of human rights in North Korea, establishment of conditions favorable for unification, etc. all formulate the main frame of the “preventative engagement policy.” This policy intends to directly approach the North Korean general people beyond the regime.

Genuine Trust-building Process on the Korean Peninsula

The trust-building process aims at building inter-Korean trust and eventually achieving unification thereafter. Dialogue and pressure are two means to reach this goal. President Park stated that she “will not overlook the lives of the North Koreans” together with the endeavor to change the North Korean regime and the system. This implies that the partner to build trust extends from the North Korean regime to the North Korean population. Thus, measures to relieve the sufferings of North Korean people — to the extent so that they could sense it — should follow the severe pressure on the Kim Jong-un regime. We should bear in mind that gaining trust from the North Korean people forms the most basic grounds for achieving unification.

The current administration’s policy on unification and North Korea stands out as it explicitly emphasizes unification as the policy goal. The point that this administration sets unification as the ultimate goal beyond the stable management of division, unlike the previous administrations, needs to be appreciatively assessed. Fundamental changes in North Korea should establish the basis of Korean unification and the collapse of the Kim Jong-un regime is not the final aim of the trust-building process. South Korea’s goal lies in the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and unification beyond changes in the Kim Jong-un regime and this stands as the nucleus of the trust-building process.

Once North Korea arms itself with nuclear weapons, South Korea’s policy on North Korea and unification confronts intrinsic limits. Time is running out for North Korea's denuclearization, and the destiny of the trust-building process depends on effective use of this “golden time.” It is high time to take full-fledged efforts for the trust-building process in order to radically change North Korean regime and system, which could lay the groundwork for Korean unification. North Korea’s complete denuclearization is the prerequisite for building inter-Korean trust. Moreover, it



is imperative for the North Korean regime to change for the smooth progression to unification and integration between the two Koreas. The trust-building process on the Korean Peninsula, in the genuine sense, aiming at unification should continue.

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