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Evaluation on North Korea's IRBM Test Launch and Prospects for US-North Korea Relations

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On February 12th, North Korea pushed ahead with test-launching Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile(IRBM). This provocation of the North has poured cold water on expectation in the air that North Korea will set a new direction in building relations with the US in the early days of Trump administration. As this incident indicates, the Kim Jong-un regime's obsession for nuclear and missile advancement has been proven to remain intact. This paper sets out to evaluate North Korea's nuclear testing, analyze its impact on US-North Korea relations, and present a way on how South Korea should respond to the testing of its northern neighbor.

Analysis and Evaluation on North Korea's Provocation with Long-range Missiles

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea(the DPRK) has attempted to build up the technical and operational capability of its missiles. It launched a new type of solid-fuel intermediate-range ballistic missiles mounted on tracked transporter erector launcher(TEL), through which it has enhanced the missile's capability of being elusive as well as its launching capacity.

The North has also made submarine-launched ballistic missile(SLBM) been converted into surface-to-surface missile(SSM), improving a value of multi-purpose missiles, through which it has strived to nullify the US-Korea preemptive strike capability and strengthen a second-strike capability. From the diplomacy and security perspective, the Kim regime has endeavored to leverage this provocation in turning the situation on the Korean Peninsula in their favor. In other words, the DPRK has made its intention clear that it will not give up on advancing nuclear and missile programs and that it will lead the US-North Korea relations in an aggressive manner under the precondition that the Trump administration recognizes it to be a nuclear state. What this statement indicates is that the North will maintain its non-negotiable stance and the radical struggle toward the US if Washington fails to offer a prompt and huge concession. In fact, Pyongyang must have attempted to trigger conflicts between the US and China and between the Republic of Korea(the ROK) and China and create a regional structure of security-coalition against Korea-US-Japan. Even before this provocation, the regime must have expected that the controversy over Terminal High Altitude Area Defense(THAAD) will once again come to the fore in the region with contesting opinions over missile's technical configuration.

However, this missile test-launching is a reckless provocation caused by North Korea's strategic miscalculation and misjudgement on the current situation. North Korea's provocation will not impose a damage on the foundation of the extended deterrence of the US and Korea. Deterrence by punishment and denial will be maintained and continue have an effect on the North for a significant amount of time due to the state-of-the art traditional weapons system of the joint Korea-US military and the US dominant nuclear armament against the North. Especially, the more the North considers the uncertainty looming large over the massive retaliation and preemptive strike from the ROK and the US, the higher our deterrence capability will become. Should North Korea enhance the capability of portable launch pad, as it did this time, it will ironically increase the need for the preventive and preemptive

strike targeting the North Korean leadership, thereby ultimately endangering the security within the North. It is highly unlikely that the North's provocation will lead to the creation of regional security structure favorable to the DPRK. Rather, it will strengthen the US-led regional alliance and the level of coercion on the North will become reinforced. However, gathering forces centering around the North Korea-led alliances will not be as easy as one might think since China and Russia are highly unlikely to have severe structural conflicts with America over a matter not directly related to their national security interests.

Increased Level of Coercion on North Korea and Worsening US-North Korea Relations

Then, how a situation will unfold in the future? The increased level of coercion on the North and the worsening US-North Korea relations will be the main driver for bringing about a change in situation on the Korean Peninsula. International sanctions and pressure placed on North Korea will become tougher. In fact, the UN Security Council promptly released a press statement on February 13th, one day after the provocation. And Korea, the US, and Japan will stand firmly by principles and goals of denuclearization and strive to strengthen not only a missile defense but also have information assets enhanced and shared among them. Under such atmosphere, China would have no choice but to more actively engage in coercing North Korea. Should Beijing be unwilling to join in sanctions against Pyongyang, there might be a possible retaliation from Washington, such as a secondary boycott. And then North Korea's nuclear issues could become a strategic burden for China in building relations with the Trump administration. The downward spiral in the already deteriorating US-North Korea relations will be expected in the future since both America and North Korea are less likely to lower the bar of their existing demands or accept the demands of the other party without any strings attached. Instead, both are more likely to gradually increase the level of coercion toward each other. The North still holds onto its calculation that the long-term benefits of nuclear and missile advancement far outweigh the short-term losses caused by sanctions. North

Korea, therefore, will be expected to call for much bigger preconditions and demands that the US will find it hard to accommodate, which are represented by “disarmament,” “freezing nuclear development,” and “peace treaty.” For the time being, the US will opt for maintaining a hard-line approach, rather than seeking a compromise with the North. There is a growing likelihood that America may make North Korea’s nuclear issues a high priority in its national security and increase the level of coercion on the North more than the past. The Trump administration, which argues for coercive diplomacy in dealing with the DPRK, is expected to induce North Korea into a denuclearization talk through sanctions and pressure. It will gradually screw up the level of coercion if the North refuses to accommodate such demands.

The options for coercive measure depending on the various levels of intensity that the US can consider can be as follows: 1) increasing the intensity of the Korea-US joint military exercise; 2) implementing a partial secondary boycott; 3) declaring a permanent deployment of strategic assets on the Korean Peninsula; 4) enforcing a complete secondary boycott; 5) declaring tacit ultimatum, such as setting the redline for a preventive strike. However, whether the US will actively review a permanent deployment of its strategic assets or preventive strike strategy remains uncertain especially when the level of threat posed to America is not that high. However, when and how and to what extent a secondary boycott gets enforced will be determined more by whether China is cooperative on North Korean issues, rather than affected by the heightened nuclear threats. Even on the odd chance that the North officially declares a moratorium on nuclear tests, the US coercive policy toward the North is not likely to go through a fundamental change. It is because the US strategic utility and interests on North Korean issues are not of high priority at the moment. In short, the North’s declaration of moratorium on nuclear testing could be a sufficient condition for resuming a dialogue at best, but not a necessary and sufficient condition that drives the US’s concession to the level that matches the demands of the North.

Strategic Considerations for South Korea

South Korea should keep in mind the two following strategic considerations in the face of increasing coercion on the North and worsening US–North Korea relations. First, it should steadfastly stick with the existing sanctions and pressure on the DPRK. North Korea is highly likely to push ahead with testing a boasted fission weapon with an explosive power of 40 to 100kt, proclaiming that the success of such testing is the sheer evidence of having completed the hydrogen bomb test. And the North will also carry out an additional test of Musudan missile, ICBM, SLBM that have neither met the capability standard nor get implemented. Therefore, the South Korean government should enhance the effectiveness of sanctions by strengthening the monitoring and at the same time make the North Korean leadership recognize the credibility for sanctions' substantiality. More efforts should also be put forth on exploring additional objects subject to sanctions. Imposing multi-layered sanctions could also be used as a bargaining chip in holding talks with North Korea in the future. In other words, when resuming the dialogue, the level of enhanced negotiation skills of the ROK and to what extent it should be reflected in talks could be determined by how sanctions are strategically operated.

Second, whether the US–North Korea relations go through some changes should also be noted. There remains a chance, albeit a slim one, of the resumption of US–North Korea dialogue even though such scenario is unlikely. If North Korea's response capability to resist is seriously undermined in the short-term by the increased level of coercion from America and active cooperation of China, the US–North Korea dialogue might take place with the North making a concession on areas that relatively see smaller strategic loss, such as declaring nuclear moratorium or allowing limited inspection on nuclear facilities. And one cannot rule out the possibility that the US might become more actively engaged in bilateral talks with North Korea in return for China's efforts to toughen the sanctions. However, under any circumstances, North Korea's primary purpose would be to avert the sanctions collectively imposed against it and to secure the environment for nuclear

development. In such scenario, the ROK has no need to be extremely wary of the possible resumption of the US-North Korea dialogue even when the North's genuine intention for denuclearization is put into question. What remains to be important is to establish a strategy on how to utilize sanctions in an urgent manner, such as inducing North Korea to have a dialogue on denuclearization, creating a mechanism to have sustainable talks, and driving North Korea to make a different choice in the area of policy. Above all, one should not forget that only strong sanctions and pressure against Pyongyang can increase the likelihood of having a dialogue with North Korea under the current landscape. ©KINU 2016

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