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Evaluation on US-China Summit and Its Implications on the Korean Peninsula

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The first US-China summit meeting between US president Trump and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping was held on April 6, 2017. However, the US and China neither showed any progress agreed upon major issues, such as trade, commerce, and security by skipping the usual joint press conference or a joint statement normally released right after the meeting nor arrived at an agreement on resolving issues of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), which are at the core interests of the Republic of Korea (ROK). Instead, there have been increasingly worrying signs surrounding the Korean Peninsula after the summit that the US aircraft carrier headed toward the peninsula and that Chinese chief representative of six party talks paid a visit to South Korea.

Evaluation on US-China Summit: Strategic Exploration and Containment

It seems evident when judging by the outcome of meeting that it largely aimed for a strategic exploration and containment to set the direction of the future US-China relations. During the meeting, Trump especially addressed the need for the US-China cooperation based on a principle

of “America First,” which has been emphasized by his administration ever since he took office and focused on the need to resolve the US trade deficits against China considering America’s deteriorating economic situation and his falling approval rating. Xi Jinping, instead of directly fighting back the US containment on China, set out to actively utilize Beijing’s economic advantage while trying to avert causing conflicts on sensitive diplomatic and security issues so that he could establish a stable and strong leadership at the 19th Party Congress scheduled to be held around the end of 2017. His intention was well evidenced by the agreement of both sides reached on a “100-day plan,” proposed by Washington to tackle trade imbalances between the US and China. The two major powers, with a hope of enhancing mutually strategic communications, agreed to set up four high-level dialogue mechanisms covering diplomacy, economy, law enforcement and cyber security, and social and people-to-people exchanges, replacing the existing dialogue mechanisms encompassing strategy and economy. This agreement has significant implications in a sense that it can serve as a mechanism to lower the possibility of triggering accidental conflicts and to alleviate uncertainties. The meeting eventually affirmed that both countries neither want an all-out-trade conflict nor accidental clashes due to their internal and external circumstances.

Moreover, it also reaffirmed that the two major powers (G2) have interests still somewhat different from ours given that they had failed to figure out a way to address issues on North Korea’s nuclear development and the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) deployment. The two leaders were on the same page at the principal level on the need to recognize nuclear North Korea as a threat and to strengthen the cooperation. But they made it clear that there was no agreement reached on the detailed package for the resolution of North Korean issues. In other words, the chances are that the US may have emphasized a certain role that China should play as well as the imperative for pressure through sanctions against the DPRK. China is likely to have held on to putting both dialogue and negotiation in place although it may agree to implementing the UN Security Council resolution.

This indicates that there is still a huge gap in their views between the US and China regarding a cause behind the North Korean nuclear issue and its resolution. It could also mean that Korea's strategic importance and stance is not that significant from the perspective of foreign policy strategy of those two nations. The US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson emphasized in a briefing session held right after the meeting that the US could take steps towards a unilateral measure once the US and China find the possibility of forging a cooperation unlikely. Although this statement aimed to put pressure on China to play more active role in resolving North's nuclear issue, it could also be interpreted as a warning sign hinting that Washington is ready to use a force upon Pyongyang's additional nuclear and missile provocation.

In short, the followings could be perceived as a threat: the summit meeting was held when the Trump administration's policy on the Korean Peninsula has yet to take shape; and a strategic mistrust between the US and China is deepening uncertainties in the situation of Northeast Asia. However, this could in turn serve as an opportunity if we get to the bottom of strategic intention and tactical calculations of two major powers and propose a way to expand Korea's room for strategic maneuvering.

Implications on the Korean Peninsula: Imperative to Block Negative Impact from Major Power Relations

The most crucial implication of the summit on the Korean Peninsula is that both sides recognize issues on the peninsula as a dependent variable pegged to US-China relations - a trend likely to stay into the future. In other words, one cannot rule out a possibility that Washington and Beijing could come up with a resolution for North Korean nuclear issue excluding Korea while using the nuclear issue as a leverage for winning the power competition in East Asia. Another possible scenario is that the Trump administration might take a military action against Pyongyang upon its additional provocation as witnessed by America's missile attacks on an air-force

base in Syria that simultaneously took place during the meeting. The US also might implement a secondary boycott targeting Chinese companies trading with the DPRK. However, it will not be easy for America to opt for such radical measure considering the recent trend in the US-China relations and the current status of the US economy. Rather, the US policy on North Korea is likely to lean toward inducing it to the ultimate goal of denuclearization by stressing the need for China to take up more role in addressing nuclear North Korea through pressure and persuasion. China, too, is in line with the US and Korea on how risky and severe the North's nuclear issue is and feels threatened by the US use of force in Syria and its deployment of strategic assets. Such atmosphere is also reinforced by the recent moves made by Chinese representative of the six party talks, Wu Dawei that during his visit to Korea he stressed the importance of denuclearization of North Korea and stringent implementation of the UN sanctions against the DRPK with the equal importance placed on resolving issues on the Korean Peninsula through a dialogue and negotiation.

The ROK should make a strong demand to the relevant countries that harboring peace on the Korean Peninsula be a priority in the face of rising tensions surrounding the peninsula that have been witnessed right after the US-China summit. It should also demand that an agreement be reached through a consultation with the Korean counterpart regarding an important policy-making decision on the Korean Peninsula. Above all, it is essential for the international community, including the US and China, to make a solid pledge that it could enforce far stronger sanctions against the North upon its additional nuclear and missile provocations.

The fact that the meeting failed to produce a solution for North Korean nuclear issue indicates that the time has come to put in place some creative measure, thinking outside the box, in the process of achieving denuclearization of North Korea. First, a theory of holding the whole international community accountable in addressing North Korean issues should be proposed going beyond the existing theories of

making North Korea, China, and the US responsible. In other words, we should induce major powers to take up more active role, including the US and China, who have thus far been reluctant to resolve nuclear North Korea, and bolster the international cooperation for the denuclearized North Korea. Second, the so-called “Korea Solution” should be preemptively presented - a solution that could respond to the China’s dual-track approach of denuclearization and peace treaty considering its possibly expanded role in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue. Korea Solution should focus on fostering the right environment for a dialogue that enables addressing North Korea’s nuclear issue with a priority placed on an agreement with the US in the due process. Third, an effort should be put forth to make issues on the Korean Peninsula a priority in formulating foreign policy strategy of both Washington and Beijing so that issues on North Korea and its nuclear development can be viewed as something concerning the survival of the Korean Peninsula not as a subject for strategic competition and conflicts between the US and China. To that end, the cooperation on crafting policy with decision making groups and the involved expert groups should be expanded given that Trump is, over time, more likely to accept the opinions of an official policy decision making line in a foreign policy, instead of going for his personal preferences. In addition to that, public diplomacy should be strengthened that helps experts, who believe in a theory of regarding North Korea as a burden, raise their voices and enhance their standing. In doing so, a negative impact caused by North Korea’s nuclear on the Chinese economy and its foreign relations can be emphasized. Furthermore, efforts should be followed to enhance the conditions for cooperation between Seoul and Beijing. ©KINU 2017

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