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Analysis of North Korea's ICBM-class Missile Test and Proposed Strategic Response for South Korea

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On July 4, North Korea carried out a test for the Hwasong 14 intercontinental ballistic missile. An announcement was made by the North right after this missile launch that the missile flew along a predicted path for 39 minutes, reaching a maximum height of 2,802km and traveling a total of 933km. As North Korea went ahead with this act of provocation of launching a missile despite the repeated warnings of the international community, the level of sanctions and pressure imposed on North Korea will significantly increase far more than ever before. This paper evaluates such provocation, analyzes the ripple effect caused by the act, and proposes a strategic response for South Korea.

Goals of the Missile Test and Evaluation

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has sought to develop the ability to produce ICBMs and enhance the strategic benefits by demonstrating its nuclear power. During its military parade last April, the North regime unveiled seven new missiles. In the following three

months after the parade, North Korea had carried out tests for 6 out of 7 missiles, and was successful each time. After 2016, Pyongyang has made various technological advancements in a relatively short period of time, such as high-thrust engines, stage separation, real-life applications of solid fuel, and improvement of the stability, mobility, and the degree of concealment for mobile launchers. However, North Korea did not reveal the test results on the re-entry of warheads, guide and control of the missiles, and the speed of missiles during ascension and the final stages of flight, all of which must have been measured during the test launch. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude that the DPRK has completed the technological ability to produce ICBMs. However, through the results of this test, North Korea did demonstrate that what Kim Jong-un boasted about during New Year's Address was not an exaggeration — North is in the final stage of the test launches for ICBM. Through this test, North Korea would have attempted to increase the level of international attention paid to future acts of further provocation of nuclear missiles, and to secure the credibility of actually realizing the threats. Ultimately, the regime will come to conclude that such acts of provocation will be helpful in bluffing about its nuclear ability.

Simultaneously, North Korea would have been planning to use the strong resistance against the US to take the initiative in the North Korean nuclear situation. Kim Jong-un is probably content with strategic benefits derived from highly intense acts of provocation. He would have paid attention to the situation, in which different opinions were offered by various countries as a solution to the North Korean nuclear problem and the new domestic and international conflicts were caused in the process of responding to the problems, such as the THAAD deployment issue. In 2017, the Kim Jong-un regime is especially focusing on strengthening the strategic position through provocations, which is generally known as the reputation effect. Starting with an intermediate-range missile provocation on February 12 until July this year, North Korea has carried out a total of 12 missile tests. The tests average out to once every 15 days after the emergence of the Trump administration or to six times in two months ever since the new South Korean administration took office. However,

North Korea may have realized that the current state of affairs is heading in an unexpected direction. Most prominently, in April the heads of the US and China reached a consensus on the framework of the ‘sanctions–denuclearization policy,’ and leaders of South Korea and the US came to a broad agreement on the framework laying out the level of threats, procedures of response, methodology, and final goals of addressing the North Korean nuclear problem. The North believes that the US coercive strategy toward North Korea is leading such change, and ends up having chosen a strategy of directly provoking the US with missile threats.

Feasibility of Achieving the Goals of Missile Test and Its Ripple Effects

What would be the ripple effects of North Korea’s provocation on future state of affairs? In the military aspects, North Korea could be reasonably assessed to have achieved a significant level of technological progress that will allow high–altitude flight for ICBMs even though technology on re–entry and navigation guidance cannot be confirmed at the moment. Yet it is highly dubious whether North Korea would be able to achieve its diplomatic and security goals through provocations. The act of provocation will not be very helpful for North Korea to secure its initiative, and would rather lead to creating a condition unfavorable for them. First and foremost, the improvement in North Korea’s ICBM technology itself will not be a game changer in the North Korean nuclear situation. For something to become a game changer, there must be an increased possibility of the structural change in the current state of affairs and simultaneously the important players should be able to change their strategies on a large scale. In the current North Korean situation, possible game changers are the US military actions taken against the North, a change in China’s strategy towards North Korea, an announcement made by South Korea and Japan that they will arm themselves with nuclear weapons, North Korea obtaining the second strike capability against the US, and a sudden change in North Korea’s domestic situation. Even if North Korea will be able to obtain the technology

to perfect the production of ICBMs that is currently lacking, strategic ripple effects will be extremely limited when compared to the US overwhelming nuclear superiority against North Korea, so such action will not have significant effects on structural changes to the current state of affairs.

The possibility that this provocation leads to creating a strategically favorable environment for North Korea is also low. The international sanctions regime will be immediately strengthened. In the near future, the UN Security Council is highly likely to pass a resolution that places even stronger sanctions on the North. This is because the US is very determined to back the sanctions and China does not ultimately oppose the adoption of sanctions. Consequently, China will be highly likely to cooperate on some economic sanctions, such as restrictions on tourism, stopping of imports of processed textile goods, and some regulations on the import of iron ore, all of which will practically cut out the financial channels for North Korea. The ROK-US-Japan cooperation to put pressure on North Korea will also be strengthened further. On July 7, the heads of three states reaffirmed a goal for denuclearization, which is complete, verifiable, and irreversible, and promised to put maximum pressure on North Korea. This was the first joint statement co-signed by all three parties in the history of eight ROK-US-Japan summits. Aside from multilateral sanctions, the US individual sanctions and pressure on North Korea will also intensify further. Following this provocative actions, both the government and citizens of the US have increasingly demanded that the sanctions on North Korea be increased — a situation that is unprecedented. According to the results of a public opinion poll released on July 13, 40% of US citizens responded that North Korea poses the greatest threat to the US - 10% higher than those who placed IS as the greatest threat. Supporters for attacking nuclear facilities in North Korea also outnumber opponents. The US Congress will also strengthen its measures of pressure on North Korea. Until North Korea agrees to denuclearization, the strategy undertaken by the US to put pressure both on China and North Korea using superiority of strength seems likely to become reinforced.

As Pyongyang repeats its acts of provocation, China's pressure on North

Korea will increase and the possibility of a fracture in the China–Russia alliance over North Korea will decrease. The Trump administration is tolerating the loss created by an economic conflict between the US and China, and continues to actively promote solving the North Korean nuclear problem by pressuring China. From China’s perspective, there will be no reason to continue protecting North Korea at the risk of increasing the possibility of losing vital national interests caused by the worsening of the US–China relationship. Consequently, as North Korea continues its provocative actions, China’s sanctions and pressures on the North will only increase. Russia will use the worsening relationship between North Korea and China to strengthen its influence on the Korean Peninsula. Thus, while Russia is expected to participate in international sanctions on North Korea based on its cooperative relationship with China, Moscow may seek to advance its political and diplomatic relationship with North Korea by circumventing economic sanctions against Pyongyang. Therefore, with North Korea staying on a path of provocations, China is increasingly under strategic burdens — not only the one created by the pressure imposed by the US, but also the one created by the fact that they have to respond to Russia’s growing influence on the Korea Peninsula.

Proposed Strategic Response for South Korea

For the time being, the DPRK will not choose to talk or negotiate but carry out further acts of military provocation, demonstrating its capacity for nuclear advancement and the strategic value. More specifically, the North is highly likely to proceed with additional military provocations as a response to the ROK–US joint military exercise and sanctions on North Korea. As a matter of fact, North Korea gave warning of further acts of military provocation through a statement made by Ministry of Foreign Affairs on July 14. Its additional act of provocation is likely to take the form of testing a boosted fission weapon with a strength of 40–200kt, or a test launch of another ICBM or a modified SLBM. In the event of further testing, North Korea will reveal detailed results such as the missile’s maximum range in

order to prove the credibility in the capabilities of its nuclear missiles. Thus, the North will soon carry out another act of provocation designed to contradict those, who did not recognize the recently tested missile as an ICBM, such as South Korea, the US, and Japan. The proposed strategic response by South Korea that should be undertaken to restrain the North's further acts of provocation and lead North Korea into denuclearization talks is as follows.

First, to strongly refrain North Korea from additional provocations, the South Korean government must ensure that North Korea is aware of two strategic uncertainties — the uncertainty that lies with the North Korean leadership in expectation for nuclear missile provocation, and the one based on the possibility that South Korea and the US will take military responses against the North. The former indicates that North Korea, even if it obtains the nuclear missile capable of high-altitude flight as intended, will not be able to be certain in reaching its military aims, due to powers of denial. The latter refers to a case in which the North Korean leadership is made more sensitive to the possibility of facing unbearable punishments of various kinds in case North Korea continues acts of provocation or actually uses nuclear missiles.

Second, the South Korean government must exert maximum effort into placing sanctions and pressure on North Korea in order to actively interfere in North Korea's strategic calculations. In other words, South Korea must structuralize a zero-sum situation, in which the expected loss from sanctions and pressure is much greater for North Korea than the expected benefits of security that can be derived from advancing its nuclear weapons. Consequently, South Korea must consider other measures for more comprehensive sanctions besides the currently applied smart sanctions. While strong smart sanctions are in place against the North Korean regime, the Kim Jong-un regime is offsetting the effects of sanctions by exploiting North Korean residents or changing how its resources are redistributed. Thus, realistically it is difficult to expect sanctions to be effective from imposing smart sanctions alone.

The South Korean government is facing an uncomfortable phase in which the government must find ways to affect the North Korean economy as a whole while minimally affecting the lives and rights of the North Korean residents.

Third, South Korea needs to strategically use Russia in order to keep the driving force of sanctions alive while simultaneously ensuring that the North Korean nuclear situation is resolved to South Korea's advantage. While China's role is still important in resolving the North Korean nuclear problem, expecting China's active cooperation in the short-run can be difficult when considering China's geopolitical benefits and strategic advantage against North Korea. However, Russia's benefits and value concerning the Korean Peninsula are markedly different from those of China. Compared to Beijing, Moscow's strategic interests in East Asia and the Korean Peninsula are more economic-oriented, rather than security-oriented. Thus, if a cooperative economic project can be visualized between South Korea and Russia or if Russia's interests can be included in a future ROK-DPRK-Russia agreement for economic cooperation, South Korea will be able to more actively induce Russia into crafting a policy towards North Korea that more incorporates South Korean interests.

Fourth, in the face of unavoidable current phase of increased sanctions and pressures on North Korea, the North Korean nuclear problem can only be solved through a dialogue. Consequently, a strategy that deters North Korea from further provocations while leading it into denuclearization talks must be proposed. In other words, a strategy must be materialized both for 'dialogue through sanctions' and 'pressure for dialogue.' To this end, the South Korean government must demonstrate to North Korea both Red-Line and Blue-Line: 1) the former being further sanctions-oriented in proportion to the level of provocations by North Korea; 2) the latter being incentive-based to promote a dialogue with North Korea while compelling it to participate. In other words, while presenting a choice of agreeing or disagreeing to our request for denuclearization to the North, the South Korean

government must offer options of punishments and incentives that the North Korean leadership can choose from, thus ensuring that the South Korea's intentions and benefits are incorporated into policy choices of North Korea. For this, the South Korean government should promptly prepare for a dialogue with North Korea by strategically reevaluating and sorting out agenda that can be discussed and agreed by both Korea. ©KINU 2017

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