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Evaluation of Kim Yo Jong's Visit to South Korea and Strategic Road Map of the ROK Government

Hong, Min
(Director, North Korean Studies Division)

The North Korean high-level delegation, including Kim Yo Jong, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's younger sister and a special envoy to South Korea, went back to the North on February 11 after a two nights and three days stay in the South. The Korean Peninsula is now entering a new phase thanks to a historic turning point in inter-Korean relations created by the PyeongChang Winter Olympics. This paper attempts to uncover strategic meanings behind North Korea's moves of dispatching Kim Yo Jong as a special envoy to South Korea and provide a corresponding future strategy for the ROK government.

Kim Jong-un's Hidden Card: Meaning of Kim Yo Jong's Visit to South Korea

It would make sense to assume that the decision to send Kim Yo Jong to South Korea as a special envoy could have been made at the last minute in the process of selecting the make-up of delegation. That decision may have come out of recognition during a working-level discussion that there is a need to show a dramatic effect and gain strategic momentum under the current situation.

Second, North Korea may have thought that there needs to be a certain leverage that serves as momentum in inter-Korean relations. In other words, the North regime seems likely to have contemplated which figure and what messages will be suitable to produce the most eye-catching effect, thereby demonstrating its willingness to improve inter-Korean relations and showing a new phase that has arrived on the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang may have considered the effect of utilizing Kim Yo Jong's soft image into building the Kim regime's image as stable, flexible, and peace-loving.

Third, the North might have put out a hidden card in the form of Kim Yo Jong that could act in the Moon Jae-in government's favor. By sending his own little sister of the Kim dynasty as a special envoy, Kim Jong-un provided both an opportunity and a sense of obligation to the South to act reciprocally, thereby securing the drive and continuum in holding future inter-Korean dialogue.

Fourth, Pyongyang must have taken Ivanka's visit into consideration. Its calculation could have been that sending Kim Jong-un's own sister to the South could have a dramatic effect showing how the US and North Korea are on the equal footing, how strong its presence is, and how normal state it is. The DPRK also utilized both images of nuclear state, as demonstrated in a limited showing of massive military parade on February 8, and of Kim Yo Jong - a strategy aimed to properly mix images of "nuclear state" and "normal state" with a recent "improvement of inter-Korean relations."

Strategic Meaning of North Korea's Course of Actions

First scenario is using inter-Korean relations as a short-term tactic to weather through the current sanctions regime. North Korea is highly likely to have been threatened by intensified international sanctions, the expansion of US strategic assets deployment, and its talk of military options. So Pyongyang may have attempted to turn the situation around by declaring early to have completed its nuclear force and improving inter-Korean relations. However, while this analysis conveniently interprets North Korea's move as a short-term camouflage tactic, it has a limitation as to what kind of strategic road map is underpinning North Korea's recent moves.

Second, the North could have made moves according to its road map of the

mid- to long-term, at least of the next 3 years, toward a path to US-North Korea dialogue. Pyongyang wants to have a negotiation on nuclear disarmament with Washington under the recognition as a nuclear state. The North regime appears to come to the conclusion that the Trump administration is not likely to accommodate its demands and that therefore it does not need to go through all the trouble of confrontation and bickering with the current US administration, whose term is within less than 3 years. The DRPK could have thought that it would be better to focus on improving inter-Korean relations with the Moon government while restraining itself from nuclear provocation and building peace-loving image so that it has a better shot at having a dialogue with the next US administration.

Lastly, there could have been a change of broader strategic road map. The Kim regime aims for peaceful coexistence with the US under the recognition as a legitimate nuclear state. However, the US strongly opposes this attempt. Pyongyang's intention could be interpreted as that the regime is putting its plan into test, not through the US, but through improved inter-Korean relations - a plan that simultaneously promotes peaceful co-existence as a normal state and secures nuclear state status.

So far, sanctions and pressure on North Korea have only intensified due to its nuclear and missile provocations. If North Korea voluntarily puts a stop to its provocation and remains to be committed to the improvement of inter-Korean relations for over a couple of years, the intensity of sanctions and the international support around it will inevitably weaken. In other words, should Pyongyang continue on a path of limited peaceful coexistence while maintaining a halt of provocation and keep improving inter-Korean relations in the mid- to long-term, major stake-holders surrounding the peninsula, such as the US, China, Russia, and Japan, will inevitably face a changed phase where they will eventually have no choice but to adopt that change into their policy on North Korea.

How the ROK Government Should Respond in the Future

President Moon responded to Kim Jong-un's invitation to North Korea saying that "Let's create the conditions first." Those conditions can be analyzed as follows. First of all, there needs to be a halt of North Korea's nuclear and missile activities.

The improvement of inter-Korean relations should lead to create the effect of freeze of nuclear and missile activities. North Korea may have been waiting for a chance to stop their nuclear and missile pursuit. And the improved inter-Korean relations will provide a perfect opportunity for the North. The North does not want to give the impression that it has stopped its nuclear and missile activities because of the US. Therefore, now is the time for the ROK government to formulate a sophisticated strategy to provide a rationale to the DPRK for halting provocations. Improved inter-Korean relations will produce the effect of nuclear and missile freeze and this freeze phase should naturally open a gateway to the US-North Korea dialogue and resolve North Korea's nuclear issues.

Firstly, South Korea needs to dispatch a special envoy to North Korea around early or mid March. A special envoy should remind the DRPK of the importance that refraining from nuclear and missile activities is a key to managing the current phase. In addition, the Moon government should consult with the Trump administration about the need to adjust the scale of US strategic assets deployment during ROK-US joint military exercises. North Korea does not seem likely to use the Key Resolve and Foal Eagle joint military drills as a rationale for staging provocative actions. Kim Jong-un's decision to use Kim Yo Jong as a hidden card illustrates that he will not spoil the spring mood created by inter-Korean dialogue by taking issue on the ROK-US joint military exercises. If inter-Korean summit meeting leads to the continuous halt of provocation creating the freeze effect until after September this year, the basic conditions will have been created for the US-North Korea dialogue. Under such circumstances, the US will have no choice but to contact North Korea and start engaging in a dialogue. ©KINU 2018

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