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Evaluation of North Korea–China Summit and Its Implications on the Korean Peninsula

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A measure should be crafted to more actively utilize China under the recognition of China's inevitable role to play amidst mixed concerns and expectations for the cozy North Korea–China relations after the summit between Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping. To that end, South Korea–China cooperation should be focused on denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, cooperation with China should be strengthened at multilateral institutions. Moreover, there should be efforts to associate China's One Belt One Road initiative with South Korea's New Economic Map Initiative for the Korean Peninsula, thereby ultimately devising measures that guarantee North Korea's participation.

Objectives and Impact of North Korea–China Summit

Chairman Kim Jong-un of the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DRPK) and Chinese President Xi Jinping had a series of summit meetings both in March and May 2018. This paper aims to provide a summary of background and objectives of

the North Korea–China summit held in May in the course of fast-moving situation on the Korean Peninsula. First, North Korea attempted to strengthen its bargaining power over the U.S. by strategically reinforcing communications with its traditional ally, China, in leading up to the North Korea–U.S. summit. Kim Jong-un’s visit to Beijing in March resulted in the inclusion of China in denuclearization discussions of the Korean Peninsula, which had been led by South Korea, North Korea, and the U.S. up until that point. At his visit in March, Mr. Kim was able to win over China, which had concerned about “China Passing” amidst the rapidly changing situation on the Korean Peninsula after the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. In May, Chairman Kim again visited Dalian and reiterated the importance of strategic communications with China in a bid to respond to the U.S. toughening of requirements for denuclearization.

Second, the ulterior motive behind Beijing’s hosting of this summit with Pyongyang was to find a breakthrough in the current situation, in which it had been completely excluded from the agreements of holding the inter-Korean summit and the North Korea–U.S. summit. Through May summit, China also attempted to strengthen its position and influence on the Korean peninsular issues. In particular, China began to seek more active role as a main stakeholder in the process of denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. China’s shift of strategy is a reflection of recent changes as stipulated in the Panmunjom Declaration — adopted at the inter-Korean summit on April 27 — where it suggests actively pursuing trilateral meetings involving the two Koreas and the U.S., or quadrilateral meetings involving the two Koreas, the U.S. and China with a view to declaring an end to the War.

The North Korea–China summit talks, resumed after seven years since Kim Jong-il’s visit to China in May 2011, will have a significant impact on the current situation on the Korean Peninsula. First, given that China welcomed and endorsed North Korea’s commitment to complete denuclearization, the situation is highly likely to face a turnaround where a roadmap for denuclearization might require the cooperation of involved countries that include China in addition to the existing three

main actors — South Korea, North Korea, and the U.S. In fact, Beijing makes it a basic principle that resolving denuclearization issues and establishing a lasting peace regime should be best led by the two Koreas. However, it still prefers the application of multilateral approach or the holding of quadrilateral meetings among the two Koreas, the U.S., and China given that it considers itself an important stakeholder. North Korea would probably seek to maintain friendly relations with China so that the North can brace itself for consequences of the North Korea-U.S. summit — positive or negative — and can later utilize the structure of strategic competition between the U.S. and China in the implementation process of denuclearization and a peace regime.

Second, China seems more likely to preemptively exercise its influence on the strategic structure of East Asia in preparation for the rapid advancement of North-U.S. relations and dramatic shifts in regional geopolitical structure after the North Korea-U.S. summit. In other words, China would probably attempt to utilize the so-called “North Korea card” to its advantage in terms of strategic competition with the U.S. It is because China has a concern that the U.S. could gain a strategic advantage on the Korean Peninsula if the North Korea-U.S. relations have been normalized on a rapid pace with China being excluded from the dramatically unfolding situation. A possibility cannot be ruled out that the current dialogue and cooperation phase between concerned countries over Korean peninsular issues could very easily be escalated into a phase of tensions and conflicts at any moment.

How to Encourage China to Play a Role amid Recent Changes on the Korean Peninsula

Maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula requires not only inter-Korean cooperation and trilateral cooperation among the South, the North, and the U.S. but also active and close cooperation with the international community, involving China, Russia, and Japan. First, there is a need to alleviate China’s concerns over “China Passing” — a phenomenon that has come to the surface amidst the

rapidly changing situation on the Korean Peninsula. The ROK government also needs to get China onto its side as a supporter for the establishment of peace on the peninsula. Since Xi Jinping's inauguration, China has become highly likely to play a more constructive role on regional issues by emphasizing its role as a responsible power. Therefore, it is necessary to put the focus of Korea-China cooperation primarily on "denuclearization and establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula" in the face of growing uncertainties in Northeast Asia, as witnessed on the Korean Peninsula. In doing so, Korea and China could come to recognize mutual benefits gained from building peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, thereby creating a virtuous cycle of South Korea-China relations and inter-Korean relations.

Second, another possibility is that China would seek to actively intervene in the implementation process of denuclearization and establishment of a peace regime on the peninsula so that it will not be excluded from such a process. Ultimately, China is highly likely to argue for multilateral security cooperation of East Asian countries, including itself. To that end, it is necessary to actively review the hosting of trilateral meetings involving the two Koreas and the U.S., or quadrilateral meetings involving the two Koreas, the U.S., and China, as proposed in the Panmunjom Declaration. Cooperation with China is crucial so that denuclearization and establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula can become high on the agenda on various forms of multilateral institutions (ASEAN+3, AIIB, and the U.N. — all of which include China.

Third, efforts should be made to induce Pyongyang into becoming a member of the international community through strategic association and cooperation with Beijing: if the North Korea-U.S. summit bears fruitful results, there will be a synchronous implementation of denuclearization and the security guarantee of the North Korean regime. If a phase of peace and stability continues into the future of the Korean Peninsula, an environment will be created where North Korea could focus on economic development and improvement of people's livelihood. In preparation for such a scenario, there should be efforts to associate China's One Belt One Road initiative with South Korea's New Economic Map Initiative for the



Korean Peninsula, thereby ultimately devising measures that guarantee North Korea's participation. ©KINU 2018

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