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North Korea's Spontaneous Denuclearization and Politico-Technical Process

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Suspicion continues over North Korea's will for implementation of denuclearization. In the face of North Korea-U.S. follow-up meetings and implementation of concrete denuclearization measures, the Republic of Korea (ROK) should go beyond simply having passive and regressive doubts. In fact, it is time to thoroughly consider the political and technical nature of denuclearization. What is currently needed is a strategy to secure irreversibility as swiftly and practically as possible. To this end, the current CVID (complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization) frame should be critically reviewed. In addition, as North Korea is the one to implement denuclearization, there is a need to understand its own denuclearization strategy and draw an outline of denuclearization roadmap that North Korea and the U.S. can jointly establish through cooperation. This paper presumes that North Korea promotes its denuclearization strategy under the principles of spontaneity, equality, and synchronous pursuit of denuclearization and economic development. Especially, the paper makes a projection on what should be included in the spontaneity-focused denuclearization. Among others, what is essential is to secure the political drive and establish a strategy to induce North Korea into swiftly entering the irreversible stage in pursuit of denuclearization.

Suspicion continues over North Korea's will for implementation of denuclearization. The doubts were ignited by the joint statement announced after the North Korea-U.S. summit, which was, to some people, too comprehensive in its format. Another suspicion followed if the North Korea-U.S. follow-up meetings and North Korea's swift actions which President Trump publicly proclaimed are being intentionally delayed. Now, people start to cast a suspicious glance at North Korea if its commitment to denuclearization and sudden change of attitude are sincere enough. Some doubts still remain unabated even with the timely announcement that Sung Kim, the U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines would meet the North Korean counterpart for preparatory talks at Panmunjon and the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo would visit North Korea on July 5.

In fact, denuclearization that North Korea currently promises to pursue is unprecedentedly massive in its target and scale. Therefore, it is necessary to consider North Korea's perspective as it is the one responsible for preparing follow-up measures for denuclearization. In the face of North Korea-U.S. follow-up meetings and implementation of concrete denuclearization measures, the ROK should go beyond simply having passive and regressive doubts. In fact, it is time to thoroughly consider the political and technical nature of denuclearization. What is currently needed is a strategy to secure irreversibility as swiftly and practically as possible. To this end, the current CVID (complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization) frame should be critically reviewed. In addition, as North Korea is the one to implement denuclearization, there is a need to understand its own denuclearization strategy and draw an outline of denuclearization roadmap that North Korea and the U.S. can jointly establish through cooperation. Among others, what is essential is to secure the political drive and establish a strategy to induce North Korea into swiftly entering the irreversible stage in pursuit of denuclearization.

Going beyond the CVID Frame

It is time to do away with the frame that identifies North Korea's

denuclearization with CVID. In fact, CVID is not a concrete methodology. Rather, it is a political “dogma” originally designed as a political rhetoric to overpower the opponents, not a by-product of implementation of denuclearization. The term CVID was first coined when North Korea triggered the 2nd nuclear crisis in 2002. Back then, the neocons (the neoconservatives) of the Bush administration wanted to use the term to put pressure on North Korea. The Bush administration had used the phrase “verifiable and irreversible dismantlement” until early 2003. After May 2003, it added “complete” to the existing phrase out of suspicion that North Korea may be developing highly enriched uranium. Main officials behind the decision included Dick Cheney (then Vice President), John Bolton (then Under-secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security), Lewis Libby (then Chief of Staff to former Vice President Dick Cheney), and Robert Joseph (Head of the White House’s NSC Nonproliferation Office). They also led the nuclear abandonment of Libya in 2003.

CVID, which was developed as a political rhetoric to put pressure during a negotiation, triggered a strong backlash from North Korea during the six-party talks. The U.S. mentioned CVID four times in the 1st meeting and 14 times in the 2nd meeting. At those meetings, North Korea reacted with a harsh protest, arguing that “only the defeated at war deserved such demands.” In the end, the two sides failed to agree on establishing a joint statement. For North Korea, “complete” and “irreversible” were interpreted as a heavy-handed demand, forcing North Korea to come to the negotiating table for unconditional nuclear abandonment without any guaranteed rewards. Such terms were also interpreted as an intention not to allow any nuclear programs even for a peaceful purpose. In the end, CVID put the sustainability of the six-party talks at risk. As a result, since the 4th meeting, Christopher Hill, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State and head of the U.S. representatives of the six-party talks started to use the term PFVD (permanently, fully, verifiable, dismantle), instead of CVID in order not to stimulate North Korea and to save the very existence of the six-party talks. Before the North Korea-U.S. summit on June 12, there was tendency to interpret PVID (permanent, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization) as a stronger version of CVID. However, when looking

back on the historical context, PVID was coined as a mitigative term to replace CVID. In the end, Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks (hereinafter referred to as “the 9.19 Joint Statement”) only stipulated “verifiable nuclear dismantlement” omitting the words “complete” and “irreversible.”

Up until now, CVID has been used as a political rhetoric that symbolizes distrust on North Korea’s nuclear program. While how it was first originated remained sealed just like a black-box, CVID has been misunderstood as an absolute and technical standard which could be identified with denuclearization of North Korea. In fact, CVID has thus far been a troublemaker, not a magic bullet in regard to denuclearization approach. The will, implementation, and methodology of denuclearization can be expressed in various ways, which could be determined by political will and implementation. Suggesting CVID as a decisive threshold or a magic bullet for denuclearization would only increase self-devouring misunderstanding and distrust, leaving little room for negotiation and implementation. Consequently, such approach does not seem useful in carrying out negotiation strategies and practical measures for denuclearization. Words of “complete, verifiable, and irreversible” are on the premise of unilateral requests in the denuclearization process rather than building mutual trust. Those words also indicate that the final judgement is also made from the outside force. That makes denuclearization a coercive process. There is no way for North Korea to tolerate CVID that connotes distrust and compulsion. Albeit paradoxical, that is why it is very important to carry out the denuclearization process accompanied by trust and spontaneous will.

Denuclearization as “Political and Technical Process”

There are roughly two perspectives on denuclearization. One is to only look at its technical process and identify it with denuclearization. A prime example is recently published article of Dr. Siegfried Hecker titled *15 Years* which is about a three-stage roadmap for denuclearization. *15 Years* lays out a denuclearization timeline focusing on the rigid technical process of denuclearization. Most of

nuclear-engineering scientists and experts estimated that it would require at least five years to meet technical requirements for denuclearization. This type of technical-oriented denuclearization timeline does not consider much about the political drive that in turn enables denuclearization. Especially, with such approach, the main actor of irreversibility becomes vague—little is considered on the question of “securing irreversibility from whose side?”

The other point of view sees denuclearization in the perspective of viable political conditions and momentum in order to secure irreversibility. This approach basically lays out a timeline to secure “political momentum and drive” and adds the technical process on top. For example, when the two and a half years of “political time” are provided, this approach focuses on how to secure maximum irreversibility within the given time span. That being said, just because this political time is over, it does not mean remaining parts of denuclearization should be left untouched. This time span is simply considered a decisive political time, after which the remaining denuclearization process needs to be continued by securing new political drives. There is no such thing as “clear, pre-determined denuclearization timeline.” Time for denuclearization is inevitably a by-product of political decisions rather than technical timeline.

Accordingly, securing the irreversibility of denuclearization can vary in its content and order depending on whose point of view and interests it should focus. The U.S., North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia can pursue different ways, orders, political resources, and timing in the process of securing irreversibility depending on their stance and strategic point of views. For example, when the U.S. establishes a timeline based on its domestic security, political reality and timing, and foreign policy, the content of irreversibility and a timeline for denuclearization may differ from those of China and Russia. In fact, denuclearization is a by-product resulted from a “big deal” made between North Korea and the U.S. Consequently, the two sides need to work together to set a timeline suitable for both.

Strategic Approach to Secure Irreversibility

Denuclearization, by nature, is meant to be a politico-technical process. It requires a sophisticated work to set a strategically seamless technical timeline. Only then can it secure irreversibility as effectively as possible on the basis of political time and drive agreed upon by North Korea and the U.S. To this end, there are two main issues that need to be critically considered. First is to proactively utilize North Korea's spontaneous denuclearization measures which can enhance the level of trust from the initial stage of denuclearization. Second, from the U.S. perspective, practical denuclearization strategies should be considered that enable implementing selective and gradual disablement measures to secure the utmost irreversibility as swiftly as possible.

The Trump administration deems it impossible to achieve complete denuclearization for all the targets within a short period considering a limited time politically allowed and physical circumstances. In that sense, what matters the most is to swiftly enter a provisional irreversible stage. For this, one should sort out targets included in the massive denuclearization list into different groups based on the priority to secure irreversibility first. Then, irreversibility should be provisionally secured by applying different levels of disabling and dismantling measures selectively and simultaneously depending on groups. Take an example of Yongbyon nuclear facilities—the main base of nuclear material production. Main facilities at Yongbyon can subject to a shutdown and a high level of subsequent disabling and dismantling works, which would take five years to go back to the previous stage. Then, other denuclearization targets whose importance is less than that of Yongbyon nuclear facilities can subject to a low or medium level of disabling measures which would take only one to two years for recovery. From then on, the level of disablement can be gradually elevated for each of the denuclearization targets, eventually leading to the disassembling and dismantlement procedures.

North Korea's Denuclearization Strategy and Outlook [1]: Denuclearization based on Spontaneity

Considering the remarks and behavior of the Kim Jong-un regime, North Korea's strategy of denuclearization can be summarized into three characteristics: 1) spontaneity; 2) equality; and 3) denuclearization that accompanies economic development. First, in terms of spontaneity, North Korea would probably want to avoid any humiliating experience where it can be seen domestically and internationally as forcefully denuclearized by others. Rather, it would be eager to give the impression that it voluntarily chooses denuclearization for "world peace." The "spontaneity" is an important code for the domestic governance of North Korea. A decision was made to change the North's strategic route from the dual policy of nuclear and economic development (Byongjin policy) to economic development at the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). This transition can be seen as a preliminary measure to show the structure of "spontaneous denuclearization" at home first. It is likely that the coordination process being implemented between North Korea and the U.S. before and after the Singapore summit would be focusing on the recognition of North Korea's spontaneous measures. President Trump seemed to understand the political implications of North Korea's spontaneous measures and recognize the necessity of their full utilization. That was why he mentioned that North Korea would take immediate follow-up measures.

North Korea is likely to implement various spontaneous denuclearization measures by the end of this year. Apart from the dismantlement of the northern nuclear test site (future nuclear program) that already took place, possible spontaneous measures of the removal of nuclear and missile facilities are as follows: dismantlement of missile engine test site (future ICBM development); dismantlement of missile launch stand (removal of the fixed launch site); dismantlement of missile launch center and radar facilities (removal of the capability for launch control); dismissal of the Strategic Rocket Force (removal of the organization to execute the

missile launch); dismantlement of research center for nuclear weapons (giving up on future nuclear technology); and shutdown of core nuclear facilities located in Yongbyon and a high level of its disabling measures (restriction on capability to produce nuclear materials in the future). If these series of measures were to be implemented by the end of this year, a substantial level of irreversibility will be secured spontaneously by North Korea. Along with this, the list of the entire nuclear programs under operation in North Korea will be submitted to the U.S. and international organizations. If such measures were to take place by December, it can move on to the next level of denuclearization starting next year. At the first stage of implementation after the suspension of the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise, the U.S. is required to take a series of following responsive measures if North Korea smoothly implements spontaneous measures for denuclearization. For example, the end of war declaration made among the South, the North, and the U.S. can be a good start. After securing the list of declaration for the entire nuclear facilities, it can open a liaison office. The U.S. can also take measures of sanctions relief on North Korea to some extent around the end of the year.

Next step is to verify the list of declaration reported by North Korea. For this, a team can be composed in the form of international consortium and visit North Korea to verify the facilities specified in the list. The verification team will inevitably be led by the U.S. with the participation of P5 (the U.S., the U.K., France, Russia, and China), IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), CTBTO (Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization), IPNDV (International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification). In addition, participants may also include working groups, research institutes, and experts from various countries that have rich training experiences through various programs such as monitoring and verification of nuclear weapons control, nuclear disarmament and verification, nuclear warheads dismantlement and verification, and technical cooperation on arms control. A detailed plan for denuclearization can be established after its entire scope has been identified through the verification of declaration list. As mentioned above, in order to secure a high level of irreversibility as swiftly as possible, target subjects need to be

distinguished and selected. Then they can be disabled, discarded, and dismantled according to the pre-defined level in a speedy manner. Considering the political time limit, the process should follow the technical timeline that is framed to secure a high level of irreversibility within one and a half to two years of time span. During that stage, North Korea needs to participate not only as the target for verification but also as a main actor carrying out the verification and dismantlement in the process of “verification of declaration–dismantlement–verification of dismantlement.” Corresponding to such denuclearization process, there should be responsive measures to be carried out as follows: suspension of and complete lift of sanctions imposed by the U.N. Security Council, negotiation over normalization of North Korea–U.S. relations or building of diplomatic relations between North Korea and the U.S., signing of a peace treaty, and change of the U.S. policy on North Korea’s nuclear program.

When a high level of irreversibility is secured, it can be pro-actively considered for the two Koreas to jointly sign the TPNW (Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons) in the General Assembly scheduled for September 2020. The TPNW is a new framework designed to replace the NPT (the Non-Proliferation Treaty), which was passed in the U.N. General Assembly on July 2017. The TPNW contains a series of strong provisions prohibiting the development, possession, and threats of use of nuclear weapons and calling for declaration of nuclear weapons, safeguard measures, international cooperation, and resolution of conflicts. Should the two Koreas jointly sign and ratify the new treaty: South Korea can refrain from developing and deploying nuclear weapons; the U.S. can refrain from threatening North Korea to use nuclear weapons; and the international community can play a role to help North Korea finalize the completion of denuclearization through the international verification and monitoring. If the two Koreas are able to show a symbolic gesture of co-signing the TPNW during the U.N. General Assembly in 2020, it would represent “a declaration of peace” that achieves both denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is planning to visit North Korea on July 5, during which he is expected to check North Korea’s

preparation and timeline for spontaneous measures—the stage 1 of denuclearization—and calculate how to secure the declaration lists on the entire nuclear program as soon as possible. If this December is the deadline of the stage 1, what matters the most is North Korea’s spontaneity. When North Korea is able to submit the list of declaration spontaneously by the deadline, the stage 2 can be initiated next year. In stage 2, both the international verification team and North Korea’s spontaneity will serve critical roles in the course of verification and dismantlement. Especially, the U.S. and South Korea are required to play significant roles by taking various and proper measures to secure the safety of the North Korean regime such as lifting sanctions, building diplomatic relations, signing a peace treaty, alleviating military threats, and promoting economic cooperation. Among others, 1) denuclearization (North Korea), 2) resolving military threats (the U.S.), and 3) gradual arms control (the two Koreas) should be interlinked with each other. In 2020, based on the achievement of having secured a high level of irreversibility, political drives and systems should be firmly prepared to complete the denuclearization.

North Korea’s Denuclearization Strategy and Outlook [2]: Process of Equal Parties and Respect

North Korea’s second strategy of denuclearization is to promote a process with the structure of “equal” parties. Under this scenario, North Korea and the U.S. are placed in equal position and carry out negotiations and implement practice based on mutual respect and trust. It is not a structure of superiority and inferiority where one becomes a unilateral evaluator and the other becomes a subject for evaluation. Rather, the two parties should be in equal position and jointly implement the process. The joint statement of the North Korea–U.S. summit stresses “trust” which also means respect and equality. North Korea participated in summits six times this year; two times of inter-Korean summit, three times of North Korea–China summit, and one North Korea–U.S. summit. Whether summits were official or not, all the counterparts of those summits showed ultimate respect and hospitality both in

diplomatic protocol and treatment of Chairman Kim Jong-un. Especially, the courtesy President Trump and other U.S. counterparts showed during the North Korea-U.S. summit in Singapore must have left quite a positive impression on Chairman Kim Jong-un and North Korean residents.

Up until now the U.S. considered that the dialogue itself would be a reward for North Korea while North Korea felt being ignored all the time as the U.S. did not answer to its consistent demands on a direct conversation and negotiation. Therefore, the courteous attitude that the U.S. showed during the Singapore summit seemed to open up a new possibility and room for North Korea to think about a strategic change. North Korea has long framed its perspective on foreign relations and typical dialogue patterns to persuade North Korean residents based on the siege mentality and hatred against the “U.S. imperialism.” This can serve as heavy shackles that cannot easily get away with especially when it chooses to go on a path of normalizing relations with the U.S., becoming a normal state, and pursuing economic development. However, during the North Korea-U.S. summit, the attitude that the U.S. showed created decisive scenes for North Korea to break free from the long-held shackles. In whatever way North Korea tries to explain a change of its attitude to its residents, those scenes can give a weight to Kim Jong-un’s desire and will for strategic change. In the end, the North Korea-U.S. relations will be newly established under a structure where denuclearization and guarantee of the regime security are mutually and politically corresponded with each other. To better promote this process, leaders of North Korea and the U.S. need to meet frequently to display the trust by exchanging words and gestures of mutual respect.

North Korea’s Denuclearization Strategy and Outlook [3]: Simultaneous Promotion of Denuclearization and Economic Development

Third strategy is to simultaneously promote denuclearization and economic development. At the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of WPK, economic development was set as a new strategic route. It can possibly be

re-evaluated as a declaration of quasi reform-opening up later. Placing “economic development” as a new pivot for governance instead of “nuclear state force” can be interpreted as a will to firmly secure the economic development route through denuclearization. This evidently shows that North Korea set becoming a normal state and developing the economy as ultimate goals for its long-term national strategy.

Some raised concerns over the North Korea-China summits held three times before and after the North Korea-U.S. summit, which can also be interpreted in the same context. In fact, China had been seemingly left out until North Korea invited China to an arena of “big deal,” denuclearization-guarantee of the regime security amid the concerns of China’s passing. It is because North Korea seemed to judge that China needed to play a role at a crossroads of denuclearization and economic development. North Korea’s intention became more evident by the fact that during the 3rd North Korea-China summit, Chairman Kim Jong-un was accompanied by Park Bong-ju, Premier of the North Korean Cabinet nominally in charge of the state economic policy and Jong Mu-guk, Vice-chairman of the WPK Central Committee responsible for science education. During that time, President Xi stressed the “invincibility” of the bilateral relationship and said, “as a close friend and comrade, we can learn, exchange, solidify, and cooperate with each other” and “jointly pioneer a bright and beautiful future.” This can be interpreted that China is willing to guide North Korea to the journey it has walked through. The economic cooperation between North Korea and China is not something that would cause concerns. Rather, it needs to be properly understood as a demonstration of North Korea’s decisive will for denuclearization and economic development (reform and opening-up) and a strategic change of direction.

In this respect, it should be noted that after completing a series of major bilateral summits, Chairman Kim Jong-un resumed his on-the-spot guidance by visiting Sinuiju and Pidansom island across Sindo-gun along the North Korea-China border area. This region includes Hwanggeumbyeong Special Economic Zone, the symbol of economic cooperation between North Korea and China which had a ground-breaking ceremony in 2011. But the construction got suspended after the

execution of Jang Sung-taek in 2013. By this on-the-spot guidance in Pidansom island and factories and enterprises across Sinuiju, Kim Jong-un seemingly attempted to: 1) send an indirect message of concentration on economic development and denuclearization to the U.S.; 2) show his pro-active will for economic cooperation with China and economy-oriented state development to China. At the same time, he seemed to try to show North Korean residents his policy will to focus on the livelihood of people and economic development. Especially, this on-the-spot guidance can be seen an evidence implying that there was a consensus reached by North Korea and China on the vitalization of economic development through three times of summit meetings.

Conclusion

One summit meeting cannot resolve doubts completely. North Korea and the U.S. set a milestone of building trust at front in the form of a comprehensive agreement. Meanwhile, both sides tactically put the concreteness and details of trust to be disclosed in follow-up meetings and subsequent behaviors. Such a dual structure that exposes its comprehensiveness outside and hides details inside seems to represent their bilateral will to prove the details of what is written in the agreement through practical and spontaneous behaviors. Although not specified in the agreement, they chose to go on a path of proving what they promised through concrete behaviors that they mutually coordinated and agreed upon. Now is the time to concentrate on maximizing spontaneity and to swiftly secure irreversibility as practically as possible under the principle of mutual trust and respect. ©KINU 2018

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