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U.S., China, and Japan's Policies on the Korean Peninsula and Prospects for Upcoming Summits

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To South Korea, denuclearization is not an ultimate goal but a process to advance inter-Korean relations. The goal of improved inter-Korean relations is for the two Koreas to seek co-prosperity with neighboring countries. Accordingly, the South Korean government should play a mediating role in North Korea's denuclearization process considering not only the U.S.–North Korea relations but also the entire Asian region as a whole. Moreover, it should be noted that the U.S., China, and Japan view North Korea's denuclearization, sanctions against North Korea and the declaration to end the Korean War as part of hegemonic competition in Northeast Asia. In this context, it is very important to explore the possibility of holding bilateral summits between the U.S. and North Korea, Japan and North Korea, and China and North Korea, and formulate policies designed to address key issues that could be discussed at the upcoming summits.

I. Introduction

South Korean President Moon Jae-in emphasized that the goal of 2018 Inter-Korean Summit Pyeongyang, the fifth inter-Korean summit,

is to improve the South-North relations, facilitate the U.S.-North Korea negotiations for denuclearization of North Korea, alleviate the military tensions between the two Koreas, and thereby eliminate the danger of a war on the Korean Peninsula. Such goals set for the summit are evaluated to have been achieved in the following sense: 1) the stalled U.S.-North Korea talks have resumed, and 2) tensions have been relieved on the Korean Peninsula through the adoption of the “Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjeom Declaration in the Military Domain.”

In spite of those achievements, however, the concerned countries make a different assessment of how far the progress has been made in the following areas: denuclearization actions of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), America’s corresponding measures and the timing, and trust-building efforts among the relevant countries. This differing view is mainly attributed to different positions and expectations of the U.S., China, and Japan on North Korea’s denuclearization issue.

II. U.S. Policy on the Korean Peninsula and Prospects for U.S.-North Korea Summit

Following the September 2018 Inter-Korean Summit held in Pyongyang, U.S. President Donald Trump expressed his support for the outcomes of the summit and the efforts of both sides to improve inter-Korean relations. He was effusive in praise, referring to Chairman Kim’s letter as a “work of art” and saying that he trusts North Korea in its commitment to denuclearization. In fact, the U.S. government and experts are of the view that the inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang has provided a momentum to resume the talks between the U.S. and North Korea, which have been stalled since last July. The U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made his fourth visit to North Korea on October 7 and discussed North Korea’s denuclearization measures and corresponding measures from the U.S. Currently, a discussion is underway between the two sides on setting the date for the second U.S.-North Korea summit. With the U.S. 2018 midterm elections less than a month away, the bilateral summit is more likely to take place after the elections.

However, a majority in Washington has been skeptical about commitment of the DPRK and its efforts for denuclearization just as in the past. The dominant view is that the denuclearization measures specified in the Pyeongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018 are practically no different from those in the Joint Statement at the Singapore Summit. In addition, many argue that what is clearly visible from Pompeo's fourth visit to Pyeongyang was a reaffirmation of North Korea's will for denuclearization talks. In other words, the North's intention to denuclearize has been confirmed but it is still unclear how far it is willing to go toward denuclearization and how trustworthy it would be in that process. Therefore, they claim that the end-of-the war declaration requested by the two Koreas as a corresponding measure should come after North Korea's denuclearization.

However, the U.S. government and experts have yet to come up with alternative concrete measures to be taken in return for North Korea's phased approach toward denuclearization. Although some issues discussed during Mr. Pompeo's fourth visit to North Korea reportedly included an declaration to end to the Korean War, North Korea's dismantlement of ICBM facilities, and humanitarian assistance, the details about measures corresponding to each phase of denuclearization still remain unclear.

Above all, the uncertainty over the ongoing denuclearization negotiation derives from the Trump administration's policies on the Korean Peninsula of unpredictable nature, including policy toward North Korea. In fact, President Trump has reversed his original promise of achieving denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula before his term ends in 2021. He went on to say that he does not want to "play the time game" with North Korea. Before his fourth trip to North Korea, State Secretary Pompeo also reiterated that he sees no need to "rush" a poor agreement with the North. In fact, the U.S. policy toward North Korea has gone through tumultuous and dramatic changes so far: from the stance to possibly launch a preemptive attack on North Korea's nuclear program, to a decision to accept U.S.-North Korea dialogue, cancel the scheduled summit talks, and then finally hold a bilateral summit between Washington and Pyeongyang. Moreover, the U.S.

positions on denuclearization have also shifted initially from a package deal to a phased denuclearization within the Trump's term and then lastly to denuclearization with no timeline imposed. The U.S.-North Korea bilateral talks are now back on track after the U.S. had refused to engage in dialogue citing the lack of denuclearization measures taken by North Korea since the June Singapore Summit. This change of attitude is the result of the Trump administration's realization that the denuclearization process would take a long time. But more fundamentally, the Trump administration lacks a comprehensive and consistent policy on the Korean Peninsula that encompasses the whole process of the North's denuclearization. In short, although the U.S. government has made policy decisions reactive to a series of North Korea's changing attitudes, there is a lack of consistent U.S.-led policy toward the Korean Peninsula.

Nevertheless, two points are clear. First, Pyeongyang's denuclearization is an important political and diplomatic issue for Washington both at home and abroad. Second, the U.S. has continuously adhered to its stance on maintaining the sanctions against the DPRK. Why does the U.S. make conciliatory gestures regarding the methods and process of directly eliminating North Korea's nuclear threats while remaining adamant on keeping the pressure on? It is because the North's nuclear program poses a direct threat to the U.S. At the same time, an ulterior motive of the U.S. maintaining the sanctions is as follows: 1) to exert constant pressure not only on North Korea but also on China, and 2) to demonstrate its hegemonic power to the international community centering around North Korea's nuclear issue. As such strategy overlaps with Trump's populist style, the overall lifting of the sanctions is likely to be a prolonged process. The end-of-the war declaration could also take longer than expected due to the following two reasons. First, the declaration to end the Korean War is a powerful bargaining chip for the U.S. government when engaging in denuclearization negotiations. Further, it is connected to an issue of stationing of the United States Forces Korea (USFK) and reshaping their roles on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. To that end, the end-of-the war declaration should be coordinated with America's diplomatic and security policy of Northeast Asia

including China. Therefore, the U.S. is unlikely to issue a declaration to end the Korean War at the initial stage of negotiations before crafting a stable policy on the Korean Peninsula. Secondly, Washington's decision on the end-of-the war declaration and its policy for the Korean Peninsula will be made at a point of intersection between its hegemonic competition with China and Trump's "me-first" approach to diplomacy. There is no reason for the U.S. to rush into making a decision to declare an end to the Korean War because such declaration is a great window of opportunity to show its leadership to the international community. In the same vein, the U.S. is unlikely to accept South Korea's mediated settlement different from the traditional method of denuclearization: having North Korea dismantle Yongbyon nuclear facilities in return for the end-of-the war declaration; and holding off disclosing a full inventory of North Korea's nuclear arsenal. In fact, The U.S. government will probably want to take practical benefits and show its leadership to the world by including a certain level of inspection and verification in a phase prior to the end-of-the war declaration.

Thus, the U.S., at the upcoming U.S.-North Korea summit, is expected to hint its intention for declaring an end to the Korean War and alleviating sanctions corresponding North Korea's actions for denuclearization. The main agendas at the summit will be how to reconfirm the progress that has been made so far in the U.S.-North Korea relations and present a future direction of the bilateral relationship as a whole.

III. China's Policy on the Korean Peninsula and Prospects for North Korea-China Summit

The Chinese government announced positive views on the outcomes of the 2018 Inter-Korean Summit Pyeongyang and emphasized the importance of strengthening U.S.-North Korea relations. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China stressed the need for the U.S. and North Korea to further promote contacts and dialogues to build a political momentum for driving

denuclearization and other issues surrounding the Korean Peninsula. Most notably, China urged the U.S. to be more proactive in dialogue with North Korea. In fact, the Xi leadership has welcomed the recent developments, including the stability on the Korean Peninsula and the U.S.–North Korea communication channels, all of which are attributed to a series of inter-Korean talks. Such welcoming attitude came from a calculation that those developments would work in favor of its security environment amid mounting domestic issues and escalating strategic conflicts with the U.S. over issues of trade and the South China Sea.

As for the North's nuclear issues, Beijing remains firm on its position of "being strong against North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons." The reason China's President Xi Jinping had not held a summit with the North Korean leader since 2013 up until recently was that North Korea had not shown its intention for denuclearization. In a major turn of event in early 2018, however, Chairman Kim declared his commitment to denuclearization and three summits have been held between the two countries thereafter. The Chinese government is fully aware that the North's denuclearization process would be a daunting task that will take years. China also recognizes that for that reason specified above, North Korea's denuclearization steps should be followed by easing or lifting of sanctions depending on the progress. While China's official position is that issues related to the sanctions should be discussed at the UN Security Council, its stance on the U.S.–North Korea negotiations on denuclearization and the security guarantee is close to that of North Korea than the U.S.

The Chinese leadership continues to stress three principles of the Korean Peninsula policy—peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, and resolution of issues through dialogue and negotiation. Yet, concerns still remain on the so-called "China passing"—a phenomenon indicating that China is left out in the negotiations—amid rapid changes of the circumstances on the Korean Peninsula. To that end, China seems to have considered specific methods and the level of engagement: 1) to avoid the Trump administration's claim for "being responsible for North Korea's nuclear issue" or "being behind the delay

of the U.S.-North Korea negotiations” and 2) to maintain and expand its influence on the Korean Peninsula in the mid- to long-term. In fact, President Xi recently made a remark at the East Economic Forum that he thinks the countries concerned on the Korean Peninsula are South and North Korea and the U.S. Such remark is evaluated to be an effort to maintain a certain level of influence and obtain practical benefits in the peace-building process that will later unfold on the Korean Peninsula regardless of its engagement in the end-of-the war declaration.

While China’s policy on the Korean Peninsula will be affected by the progress of the U.S.-North Korea negotiations and the developments of U.S.-China strategic conflicts, China will be likely to emphasize the need for strengthening the communication with both Koreas in the context of maintaining and expanding its influence on the issues surrounding the Korean Peninsula. In addition, China will also seek to strategically manage the two Koreas in the form of wielding the leading power, such as resuming the six-party talks or driving China-North Korean economic cooperation. In this process, China, through mutual state visits, is likely to attempt to fully restore the traditional cooperative relationship with North Korea and retain its clout on the Korean Peninsula. If the denuclearization negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang proceed smoothly as planned, President Xi’s state visit to North Korea is likely to take place immediately after the second U.S.-DPRK summit. The agenda at the North Korea-China summit may include strengthening bilateral strategic communication (cooperation) and the economic cooperation.

IV. Japan’s Policy on the Korean Peninsula and Prospects for North Korea-Japan Summit

The Japanese government is showing best interest in how far North Korea’s denuclearization will make progress through the Pyeongyang Joint Declaration signed by leaders of the two Koreas in September. While there still remain strong skeptical views within the Japanese government about whether North Korea’s denuclearization can actually be achieved, there are also some positive assessments that the

agreements made through the Declaration such as the permanent dismantlement of the Dongchang-ri missile engine test facility and missile launch pad will give an impetus to denuclearization. However, Japan is practically focused more on North Korea-Japan relations than denuclearization, particularly on the Japanese abductee issue. Japanese Prime Minister Abe decided to narrow the focus of its policy toward North Korea to addressing the abductee issue under the belief that denuclearization can only be achieved by the U.S. As such, his basic stance is that he will give credit to President Trump for the progress of denuclearization while focusing on resolving the issue of Japanese nationals abducted by the North. In fact, Chairman Kim Jong Un delivered his message through President Moon that he was ready to “engage in dialogue with Japan at an appropriate time.” In response, Abe also expressed his willingness to hold a summit with North Korea during his meeting with the South Korean President on September 25 saying “I will not miss any chance” to engage with the North at the summit.

While the Japanese Prime Minister currently insists on opening a bilateral dialogue by dealing with the Japanese abductee issue, the North Korea-Japan summit is evaluated to be unlikely to take place at any time soon for the following reasons. First, Abe set the bar for improving bilateral relations too high by putting the abductee issue at the front as a precondition for dialogue which was proven to be practically hard to be addressed. Second, Abe would exert more efforts on the revision of the Japanese constitution, one of the prime minister’s personal goals by 2020, than taking politically risky step of holding a summit with North Korea as he has recently succeeded in winning a third term as prime minister.

If the North-Japan summit takes place, it would be likely to be held after the U.S.-North Korea summit. Fortunately, the abductee issue is included in a package of agendas for the U.S.-Japan negotiations. In addition, the U.S. recognizes the importance of tackling the issues of Japanese abductees. Therefore, Tokyo is expected to look forward to the outcome of the second U.S.-North Korea summit, which is increasingly becoming feasible as the preparations for the U.S.-DPRK negotiations are already in full swing, driven by the inter-Korean summit. In the

meantime, Japan is likely to avoid diplomatic conflicts with South Korea over history, such as Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force not participating in the international fleet review on Jeju Island. In addition, Japan expects South Korea to cooperate and take on a more mediating role for future dialogue with North Korea.

V. Conclusion

To South Korea, denuclearization is not an ultimate goal but a process to advance inter-Korean relations. The goal of improved inter-Korean relations is for the two Koreas to seek co-prosperity with neighboring countries. Accordingly, the South Korean government should take a broader view and play a mediating role in North Korea's denuclearization process considering not only the U.S.-DPRK relations but also the entire Asian region as a whole. Moreover, it should be noted that the U.S., China, and Japan view North Korea's denuclearization, sanctions against North Korea and the declaration to end the Korean War as part of the hegemonic competition in Northeast Asia. Particularly, South Korea should reinforce its diplomatic partnership with the U.S. and China to prevent the U.S.-China conflict over issues of trade and the South China Sea from having a negative impact on the Korean Peninsula. Above all, the ROK Government should strive to build the "Responsible Northeast Asia Plus Community" and implement a "New Southern Policy"—Policy on ASEAN Countries—with a broader and long-term view to improve its diplomatic position and garner greater support from the international community.

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