

1 Cooperation with the US, China, and Russia for Denuclearization of North Korea

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Abstract

The situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula is dire over the denuclearization of North Korea. The new government of the Republic of Korea (ROK), sworn in amidst the uncertainty, should explore measures to cooperate with the US, China, and Russia to denuclearize North Korea. First, the ROK and the US need to understand each other's position on how to strengthen the US-ROK alliance. Then, it is necessary to help make the denuclearization issues of North Korea a policy priority for the US. To this end, it is crucial to make use of the upcoming ROK-US meeting as momentum for resolving North Korea's nuclear issues. The ROK needs to strengthen not only the US-led minilateral organizations but also diplomatic networks with ASEAN countries, raising South Korea's strategic importance. The ROK government should induce China to play an active role in either six-party talks or similar minilateral meetings to resolve North Korea's nuclear issues. South Korea should also seek out practical diplomatic measures so that economic values created by the trilateral economic cooperation (South Korea, North Korea, and China) can replace North Korea's geopolitical values. Lastly, the ROK needs to continue observing the escalating situation in Russia and the international community and explore measures for cooperation with Russia to counter changes in global circumstances.

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).

The barrier that stands in the way of denuclearization talks is not likely to be lifted anytime soon. International controversies are reigniting over the question of having to possess nuclear arsenals for the purpose of security. The looming possibility of Russia using nuclear weapons in Ukraine has escalated the tensions over possible nuclear wars. Above all, North Korea, engrossed in miniaturization and weight reduction of its nuclear warheads, refused to have a dialogue over humanitarian assistance and cooperation and test-launched missiles 16 times this year. Moreover, the US, North Korea's counterpart for denuclearization negotiations, has gotten bogged down in domestic economic issues, competition with China, the coronavirus pandemic, and the Ukraine crisis. Such mounting issues make the US reluctant to be actively involved in resolving North Korea's nuclear issues. The ROK government, sworn in amidst these turbulent circumstances, needs to kickstart the denuclearization process of a Korean Peninsula that is surrounded by nuclear powers. At this current juncture, the ROK is confronted with daunting challenges.

The US: Making North Korea's Denuclearization Issues a Priority of Its Foreign Policy

The Biden administration has defined North Korea's nuclear arsenal as a threat to its security and to the world. The US made it clear that North Korea's provocations will be met by stern responses and that, at the same time, it will strive to achieve denuclearization of North Korea. The Biden administration has clear goals and approaches for North Korea's nuclear issues. The US administration aims for the complete denuclearization of North Korea. In his online summit meeting with the Prime Minister of Japan Fumio Kishida this January, President Biden stressed that the ROK, the US, and Japan should cooperate on achieving a complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Recently revealed Indo-Pacific Strategy also proclaimed that the US would pursue complete denuclearization of North Korea for the security of the

Indo-Pacific region. The US has made it clear time and again that the US will provide rewards corresponding to North Korea's denuclearization steps.

However, some skepticism indeed exists over such goals and the feasibility of the measures laid out by the US. Above all, the criticism dictates that the US has not revealed exactly what those corresponding measures would be. Another concern is that corresponding measures, such as a partial lifting of sanctions, are not on par with what North Korea demands. Concerns have been raised in this line of argument that denuclearization talks between North Korea and the US are not likely to be resumed without the US offering concrete measures. Such assessments point out that the Biden administration should actively put more resources and efforts into resolving North Korea's nuclear issues. That is where our diplomacy toward the US should come in.

In other words, the ROK needs to place North Korea's nuclear issues high on the diplomatic agenda, not only in the ROK-US diplomacy, but also in the US's diplomacy. In that regard, the new ROK government's denuclearization plan contains a vital strategy to promote peace on the Korean Peninsula. The plan specifies measures for the US and the ROK to 'jointly' devise a predictable denuclearization roadmap through close coordination and present it to North Korea. However, the process of the ROK-US jointly shaping this roadmap can only be fully implemented if North Korea's nuclear issue becomes the US's policy priority, not just an crucial item on the agenda. Recently escalating North Korea's provocations have made the US pay keen attention to North Korea's nuclear issues. The ROK should utilize various diplomatic channels and persuade the US to approach North Korea's nuclear problems not as a sub-variable tied to US-China competition and its Indo-Pacific strategy but as a core variable of international security.

President Biden will pay a timely visit to the ROK for the ROK-US summit from May 20 to 23, 2022. It has been 60 years since the US president selected South Korea as the first country to visit in his trip to Asia. This sends a message that the US gives much weight to the ROK-US alliance. Therefore, it is

necessary to seize this opportunity of a summit meeting and the subsequent meetings as a source of momentum for nuclear resolution. North Korea's nuclear issue will become a significant agenda in this summit meeting. Various measures to establish a comprehensive ROK-US alliance are expected to be discussed at the summit. In particular, President Biden is likely to demand the cooperation of the ROK for the semi-conductor alliance in the face of China's emergence in the semi-conductor sector as the US defines securing semi-conductor technology as a national security goal. The ROK is on a mission to persuade the US that a comprehensive ROK-US alliance can be even more solidified when North Korea's nuclear issues become the US's foreign policy priority.

More fundamentally, the more South Korea matters to the US's national interests, the more likely North Korea's nuclear issues would become the US's policy priority. To that end, something more than a comprehensive ROK-US alliance is needed. First, the ROK should expand its role on the international stage, especially in the region. It is vital to enhance our strategic importance by establishing and strengthening various diplomatic networks. This can serve to induce the interests and support of neighboring countries when it comes to denuclearization. It appears desirable to expand cooperation with the US-led minilateral organizations, such as the 'AUKUS' (a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US), and the 'QUAD' (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue). However, the ROK primarily needs to actively enhance relations with Southeast Asian countries (centered around ASEAN), which are geographically close to the ROK and have a rich history. The importance of ASEAN countries will grow as the US continues to implement the Indo-Pacific strategy over time. Against this background, the US decided to reinforce bilateral relations with ASEAN countries, including Vietnam, mainly for economic cooperation. That is why it is essential for the ROK to be actively involved in the soon-to-be-launched 'Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)' and primarily secure our national interests.

However, South Korea needs to be cautious in making itself visible in diplomatic networks by considering relations with the US and the neighboring countries. In a White House briefing on the ROK-US summit in May, the US said 'the Quad will remain the Quad' in reference to the possible addition of the ROK to the Quad. This comment appears to be intended to avoid unnecessary frictions with China over the Quad. The ROK's haste announcement of potentially joining the Quad as part of bolstering the ROK-US alliance ends up with the US's uncomfortable comments.

The starting point of ROK-US diplomacy for North Korea's denuclearization lies in close communications between the two allies. What is more important, however, is to accurately understand what has been communicated between the two from the perspective of each other. It was inevitable that the ROK-US alliance would evolve into the body of comprehensive solidarity that encompasses economy, environment, technology, health care, and science beyond the military and security, as those sectors are becoming organically intertwined in this era. In fact, no ROK government has ever opposed the strengthening of the ROK-US alliance in this direction. Nevertheless, many ROK governments have experienced cacophony with the US over issues of North Korea, including its nuclear problems. Such a discord is ascribed to the difference in a mutual understanding and choice of detailed policy measures. In that regard, the new ROK government's diplomacy toward the US should start by grasping the US's perceived measures to bolster the alliance with the ROK.

China: Promoting Practical Diplomacy toward China

China exhibits ambivalent and passive attitudes toward North Korea's nuclear issues: it harshly censured North Korea's nuclear testing, and at the same time, it advocates for North Korea's position and puts a check on the US when it comes to the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution. China's attitude is

attributed to unique relations built on common historical and ideological roots shared with North Korea as well as North Korea's geopolitical values. North Korea's nuclear development increases China's strategic burden as nuclear issues are likely to solidify the international alliance structure of the North Korea-China-Russia versus the US and its allies.

The basic principles on North Korea's nuclear issue suggested by China include, 1) supporting denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, 2) opposing resolving issues through force, and 3) effectively guaranteeing China's legitimate national security interests. With the adherence to these principles, China advocates for improving inter-Korean relations and North Korea-US relations and promoting peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula. However, China's version of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula refers to "ban South and North Korea from manufacturing, deploying, and dispatching nuclear arsenals." In other words, it points not only to North Korea's denuclearization but also denuclearization of US forces stationed within South Korea, similar to China's suggested resolution for Korean Peninsular issues: the 'freeze for freeze agreement' that simultaneously suspends North Korea's nuclear and missile testing and the ROK-US joint military drills; and a 'dual-track approach of denuclearization and a peace regime.' Therefore, mutual communication and dialogues between South Korea and China are required to bridge those gaps.

China's diplomatic standing on the global stage has been undermined due to the US's increasing check on China and the COVID-19 pandemic. The confrontational structure caused by the Ukraine crisis has made China's strategic choices all the more difficult. In addition, stalemated North Korea's nuclear issues could make China much more isolated from the US and the international community if tensions of the Korean Peninsula are not alleviated.

At a time when this tense isolation could possibly lessen China's strategic room, China will hold the 20th Party Congress in October of this year when it determines the possible third term in office of its President, Xi Jinping. In that regard, domestic and international stability is more critical than ever to the Xi

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Jinping government. China needs to stably manage North Korea's continued provocations and make a breakthrough in improving relations with the US and the international community. The People's Republic of China (PRC) Special Representative on Korean Peninsula Affairs Liu Xiaoming's recent visible activities suggest that China is likely to play a similar role as it did as a chair in the six-party talks. Special Representative Liu Xiaoming visited Russia last March, met with representatives of the UNSC, and visited the US, the EU member states, and England. He paid a visit to South Korea in May this year, stressing "China will make joint efforts for denuclearization and stability on the Korean Peninsula." The ROK government should deploy practical diplomacy toward China: it should utilize opportunities for such visits, save China's face by emphasizing its role in resolving North Korea's nuclear issue, and earn practical benefits.

Wang Qishan, the Vice President of the People's Republic of China, attended the inauguration ceremony of the ROK president Yoon as a special envoy of the Chinese president Xi Jinping. It sends a significant signal that China dispatched its Vice President to ROK president's inauguration ceremony, marking a break from the usual customs of sending a vice-minister. This could be interpreted as meaning that China is showing its respect for the new ROK government, emphasizing the importance of ROK-China relations, and putting a check on the ROK's US-oriented diplomacy involving South Korea's potential joining of the 'AUKUS' and the 'Quad.' In other words, this could be viewed as the essence of practical diplomacy, which secures both legitimacy and benefits. The ROK government's diplomacy toward China could take a hint from China's tactics.

China's meaningful role in North Korea's denuclearization is desperately needed at this juncture. Signs of deploying nuclear testing equipment have been spotted at Punggye-ri nuclear test site. The possibility of resuming nuclear tests is looming large, after it had been suspended after the sixth nuclear testing in September 2017. In fact, pressuring China to actively join the US-led international sanctions regime could damage North Korea-China relations.

Intensified pressure on China on matters of North Korea could reduce China's influence on North Korea. As China's Special Representative on Korean Peninsula Affairs Liu Xiaoming stressed: "The keys to resolving Korean Peninsular issues are in the hands of the US and North Korea." China seems likely to highlight the roles of the US and North Korea and provide support behind the scenes to stakeholders to come to the venues for dialogues, such as the six-party talks. The ROK government should bolster its cooperation with China so that Beijing could become more active in inducing North Korea's denuclearization.

The ROK and China should promote joint cooperation to deter North Korea from provocations. Seoul and Beijing should find a common denominator that could pursue both legitimacy and secure practical benefits. It is crucial to devise measures for the trilateral economic cooperation between South, North Korea, and China that could replace North Korea's geopolitical values. One way to do that is for South Korea and China to cooperate on North Korea's economic development in parallel with making progress on North Korea's denuclearization. Another practical diplomatic measure is to consider having either Xi Jinping or Yoon visit Korea or China, respectively, in commemoration of the 30th anniversary of establishing diplomatic ties between the ROK and China.

Russia: Not Excluding Russia from Discussions on North Korea's Nuclear Issues

Russia, along with China, voted against the UNSC resolution that condemns North Korea's launch of ballistic missiles on January 20, 2022 (local time). Russia also deferred the US's resolution to add five North Korean missile-related individuals to the UNSC sanctioned list who are already sanctioned by the US. On January 21, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that although the Russian government consistently endorses a peaceful and diplomatic resolution of Korean Peninsula issues, resolving the issue is

challenging as the US and its European allies continue to cling to sanctions and pressure policy against North Korea without a constructive alternative. It also stated that Russia and China would make efforts based on the three suggestions laid out to advance the initiatives for the resolution of the Korean Peninsula issues. Three suggestions mentioned refer to a 'China-Russia Joint Roadmap' in 2017, an 'Action Plan' in 2019, and a political and humanitarian resolution submitted to the UNSC in October 2021. In particular, the resolution crafted last year mainly deals with the relaxation of international sanctions in humanitarian sectors and civil sectors not related to North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

Russia's policy on the Korean Peninsula since President Putin took power in 2000 essentially maintains three significant principles: 1) equidistant diplomacy for South and North Korea, 2) prevention of the collapse of the North Korean regime, and 3) the trilateral cooperation among South, North Korea, and Russia. Russia has paid keen attention not to be swayed by either South or North Korea through balanced diplomacy, and to have the Russia-led balance of power intact in Northeast Asia. As Russia has been wary of the possibility of reinforcing the US's unilateralism and hegemony around the Korean Peninsula, Moscow perceives North Korea's possible collapse to be a geographic catastrophe as it shares borders with North Korea. That is why Russia has actively provided humanitarian aid to the North amidst this toughening of sanctions. Russia being the second-largest aid provider to North Korea after South Korea carries significant implications.

Russia has suggested the South-North-Russia trilateral economic cooperation to break the impasse of frozen inter-Korean relations and contribute to promoting peace in the Korean Peninsula. At the core of this suggestion lies a joint project that connects a gas pipe, transmission line, and railroads from Russia to the Korean Peninsula. If successfully implemented, this project could impart economic vitality not only to the two Koreas but also to the far eastern region in Russia. Russian President Putin also mentioned that resolving North

Korea's nuclear issues requires, not sanctions, but creating the environment for North Korea's security guarantee. The trilateral cooperation could hold the keys to the resolution of the nuclear problems. However, a 20-year-old joint project has not shown any tangible progress ever since its inception. A lack of progress is ascribed not only to chronic inter-Korean tensions but also to sanctions imposed against the North triggered by its nuclear and missile developments.

Conflicts between the US and Russia over the last two decades have appeared to reach an apex, caused by Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine. As the Kremlin's threats to willingly use nuclear weapons create tensions in the world, North Korea announced to resume developing nuclear weapons and missiles as if to learn a lesson from Ukraine, where Ukraine's abandoning of nuclear weapons culminated itself in a series of crises. It could be Russia's maneuvering move to use hostilities toward the US in resurrecting the North Korea-China-Russia alliance.

As Russia's relations with the West have hit rock bottom, Moscow is expected to embolden its solidarity with North Korea. Russia is highly likely to blatantly take side with North Korea on its nuclear issues. In fact, the academic and government sector in Russia view North Korea's consecutive missile provocations this year to be understandable. They argue that North Korea takes actions since the preconditions to resume denuclearization negotiations with the US have already been lost because of the US.

The time has come to make fundamental changes in Korea's baseline diplomatic direction toward Russia, which was based on an approach to leverage the development in Far Eastern Russia and the South Korea-North Korea-Russia trilateral economic cooperation to induce Russia's support for resolving North Korea's nuclear issues. Russia perceives geopolitical challenges stemming from the US to be much more of a threat than a crisis possibly triggered by nuclear North Korea. As long as Russia highly regards North Korea's strategic values, which can check the US in Northeast Asia and so long as it retains the veto power as a permanent member of the UNSC, many constrictions are expected

on a path to cooperation with Russia on North Korea's nuclear issues.

However, it is important not to exclude Russia from the dialogues on North Korea's nuclear issue amidst the current tumultuous circumstances. Yet, Russia is still an important partner of cooperation to the ROK as the multilateral resolution to North Korea's nuclear issue has been consistently espoused by Moscow. Besides, peacefully resolving North Korea's nuclear issues will be highly unlikely without the support of Russia. It is essential to develop the rationale to foster Russia's understanding of the ROK's steadfast will for denuclearization and its efforts for peaceful resolution of North Korea's nuclear issues. It is as important to build the consensus favorable to the ROK within Russia through public diplomacy. The ROK-Russia relationship now faces an entirely new environment and challenges as the two have already embarked on the establishment of more than 30-year-old diplomatic ties.

Suggestions for Resolving North Korea's Nuclear Issues

The Yoon Suk-yeol government was sworn in amidst increasingly volatile international circumstances. In Europe, Russia is hinting at using nuclear weapons against Ukraine. In Northeast Asia, various signs of pre-testing preparations at the Punggye-ri nuclear test site have been spotted in North Korea, pointing to the possibility of a 7th nuclear test. The new ROK government should examine the positions of nuclear powers (the US, China, and Russia) over North Korea's nuclear issues surrounding the Korean Peninsula, create the environment for dialogues, and present a roadmap to drive denuclearization of the peninsula.

It is important to be attentive to each other's position on how to strengthen the ROK-US alliance through close communications and to make North Korea's nuclear issues, which are of great importance to the Korean Peninsula, a policy priority for the US. To that end, it is necessary to seize the opportunity of this ROK-US summit to create momentum to resolve North Korea's nuclear issues.

In addition, it is important to expand Korea's strategic importance by bolstering diplomatic networks with the ASEAN countries as well as the US-led minilateral organizations. The ROK government should help China play an active role in either six-party talks or similar minilateral meetings to resolve North Korea's nuclear issues. It should also seek to find diplomatic measures to replace North Korea's geopolitical values with economic values created by South-North Korea-China economic cooperation. Lastly, it is equally important to continue observing the evolving situation of Russia and the international community and to seek measures of cooperation with Russia to respond to changes in international circumstances. © KINU 2022