



DPRK NUCLEAR ISSUE AFTER TRUMP-KIM SUMMIT AND THE FUTURE OF THE ROK-US ALLIANCE

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For nearly a decade, two issues have shaped the Northeast Asian security landscape: a new Cold War between the United States and China and North Korea's nuclear weapons program. The two are related: China has de facto facilitated the North's nuclear weapons program, and that program has deepened the rivalry between the US and China.

China has a two-faced policy. It officially participates in sanctions against Pyongyang but surreptitiously helps the regime survive, giving a green light to its nuclear weapons development. China-DPRK nuclear collusion continued until President Trump declared a trade war against China in the latter half of 2017 and will be revived if something goes wrong in the US-DPRK nuclear talks. As long as China maintains its "China Dream" and its continued economic and military rise toward a China-centered international order, and as long as the new Cold War persists, Sino-DPRK nuclear collusion could resurface.

Singapore summit: disappointment and confusion

The historic US-DPRK summit in Singapore on June 12 produced both disappointment and confusion. The joint statement failed to include key principles like complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement (CVID) or a roadmap for the North's denuclearization. At the press conference after the summit, Trump stated that "provocative and expensive US-ROK joint war games will be stopped, I would like to eventually bring our soldiers back home," shocking the guardians of the alliance in Seoul. Some people refuse to believe

that Trump, supported by staff like John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, signed the unsubstantial joint statement. They believe Washington has a calculus more profound than ordinary people recognize. The summit was not the end of the era of uncertainty; rather, it was the first step into uncharted territory.

Four scenarios

The future of the North's nuclear question will be determined by Pyongyang's motives and the roles Washington will play. There are two hypotheses for Pyongyang: Goodwill and the Ploy. The Goodwill Hypothesis argues that the Kim regime has decided to give up its nuclear capabilities to qualitatively change the nation. The Ploy Hypothesis asserts that Pyongyang is engaged in a deceptive peace game to decouple the ROK-US alliance and remove US influence from the peninsula. There are two hypotheses for the US: The Good Cop Hypothesis assumes that the US continues to play its traditional roles protecting global liberal democracy and respecting allies' security. The Deal Maker Hypothesis assumes that the Trump administration under slogans like "America first" and "economic nationalism" will apply a transactional approach to the alliance and nuclear negotiations with the North.

Four scenarios are possible: Goodwill + Good Cop, Goodwill + Deal Maker, Ploy + Good Cop, and Ploy + Deal Maker. The first scenario is the best. In it, the journey toward the North's denuclearization will be smooth and Washington will not make concessions that can undermine South Korean security. ROK President Moon Jae-in's Moonshine Policy will be broadly supported. The second scenario combines the North's Goodwill and the Deal Maker role of the US. In this case, nuclear dialogue will proceed without turbulence. Though Washington is more likely to be lenient and accept Pyongyang's demands and tolerate less-than-complete denuclearization, the situation will not threaten the South's security as long as the North has good intentions. In the third scenario, Ploy + Good Cop, post-summit nuclear negotiations are likely to end in failure. The North will use salami slicing tactics as it did during the Six-Party Talks while asking for concessions unacceptable to Washington and Seoul. Amid controversies over Trump's nuclear diplomacy,

the nuclear talks will run aground and the Korean Peninsula will be plagued by crises and tension.

The fourth scenario, the worst for the alliance and ROK security, will give a blow to South Korea by combining internal division prompted by the “illusion of peace” and external isolation, pushing the future of South Korea and the alliance somewhere between life and death – ironically, as the Washington, Pyongyang, and Seoul governments’ pat themselves on the back for their diplomatic achievements. South Koreans must keep in mind that the third and fourth scenario could precipitate crises and those caused by the fourth scenario will be dangerous. A third scenario crisis would facilitate national unity and South Korea can expect help from the alliance. The fourth scenario crisis would result from a combination of external isolation and internal division caused by the “illusion of peace,” risking the nation’s security and the alliance.

The Moon government has not been willing to prepare a “Plan B” against bad scenarios. The ROK government, convinced by the North’s Goodwill Hypothesis, never clarified why Moon did not insist on the term “denuclearization of North Korea” and accepted “denuclearization of Korean Peninsula” in the April 27 Panmunjom declaration. Pyongyang uses the latter term to mean that US nuclear influence, including the nuclear umbrella, should be first removed. The Moon administration vows to downsize the South’s military and transfer wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean forces to the ROK at an early time. It appears to prefer the early signing of a peace treaty while history tells us that peace treaties have often been a means to neutralize a counterpart’s security and become a “prelude to war.” To be clear: the Moon administration’s attempt to achieve reconciliation with the North is not an object of criticism. However, it is a government’s responsibility to take both the Goodwill and Ploy Hypotheses into consideration and prepare for both as long as one is as convincing as the other.

An alliance to deal with present and future threats

The US and South Korea must recognize the threats and challenges, immediate and potential, surrounding the 64-year old alliance and develop and shape the

alliance for the future. South Korea cannot and should not ask policy makers in Washington to tolerate endless policy inconsistency caused by the Seoul government’s alternation between conservatives and progressives. Toward the US and China, South Korea needs an “alliance plus hedging” policy, which means putting the alliance in the center while simultaneously fostering non-hostile and friendly Seoul-Beijing relations. Submissive diplomacy will not change China’s ambition to build hierarchical relations with neighboring countries. It is also true that discussing ways to strengthen the alliance without participating in the US’s Indo-Pacific Strategy may only be rhetoric.

At the same time, the Trump administration’s “America-first” policy and “free-riding” criticism should not threaten the alliance. Trump should not make lavish concessions to the North that can threaten South Korean security, such as acceptance of half-baked denuclearization of the North, permanent suspension of joint military drills, reduction or withdrawal of the USFK, and an ill-timed peace treaty. Policy makers in Washington must also develop geostrategies to respond to a rising China when dealing with North Korea. In this context, many South Korean pundits find problematic Washington’s “non-proliferation-based alliance policy” by which it provides its nuclear umbrella to allies while dissuading them from developing their own nuclear capability. They worry this policy will be outsmarted by China’s efforts to strengthen Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang trilateral collaboration to check the US and its allies. That is why they endorse a “nuclear parity” strategy – a plan to deploy US tactical nukes in South Korea if the North’s nuclear question is not settled and China-DPRK nuclear collusion resurfaces. Someday, the US may have to encourage, not discourage, Seoul, Tokyo, Taipei, and other Asian allies to foster their nuclear and missile capability to curb an increasingly expansionistic China.

Alliance standing on “people-to-people” relations

For the alliance to prepare new strategies, it must firmly stand on “people-to-people” relations. If President Trump makes concessions to Pyongyang detrimental to South Korea’s security, and says to South Koreans “This is what your government wants,” it would mean that he confines the ROK-US alliance

to “government-to-government” relations. This would frustrate guardians of the alliance in South Korea who struggle to believe that Trump is neither indifferent to the fate of an ally state nor apathetic toward its people. Today the alliance stands on “people-to-people” relations, a broad and multifaceted foundation that has flourished since 1950. The future of the alliance should be decided primarily on the basis of “people-to-people” relations.

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