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Prospects for the North Korea Nuclear Issue and the Security Situation on the Korean Peninsula

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As North Korea made significant progress in its own nuclearization process in 2017, the North Korea nuclear crisis reached the brink of conflict and war. But then in the year 2018, there was a sudden reversal of the situation. Both North Korea and South Korea seized the opportunity of the PyeongChang Winter Olympics, quickly resumed their diplomatic contacts, and the tensions between the two countries were eased considerably.

Despite many twists and turns, the US-North Korea Summit was held in Singapore on June 12, 2018 as scheduled. The two sides reached four consensuses on establishing a new type of US-North Korea relations. The consensus jointly reached by the United States and North Korea, the two main parties involved in the North Korea nuclear issue, is obviously of great significance and therefore has opened the door to an endeavour for both of the two countries to seek specific paths and measures for achieving the denuclearization. After the summit, the United States and South Korea decided to suspend large-scale joint military exercises, which is another important achievement of the US-North Korea summit.

There are five main reasons for such a dramatic change in the situation

of the North Korea nuclear crisis as well as the situation on the Korean Peninsula. First of all, with the tremendous progress in nuclear weapons, North Korea has already held enough bargain chips which could be used as certain deterrents to the United States and its allies. However, if North Korea continues to advance on the road of nuclearization, especially by conducting the new hydrogen bomb tests and the intercontinental ballistic missile tests, it shall pay a huge price and also face enormous risks as a result. Second, the increasingly stringent international sanctions have played an important role in the containment of North Korea, and North Korea's economic development has faced ever growing difficulties. Third, South Korea's new president Moon Jae-in is a determined advocate of his "Sunshine Policy" and is also determined to promote peace and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula by easing the tensions and improving the ties between North and South Korea. Fourth, the US President Trump has a weak personal ideology, and he strongly hopes to reach a "grand bargain" with Kim Jong-un on the issue of denuclearization of North Korea. Finally, both China and Russia resolutely oppose the use of force to resolve the North Korea nuclear issue and are in favour of restarting the dialogue on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as soon as possible.

For the above reasons, North Korea's policy has once again shifted from "developing nuclear weapons to maintain security" to "abandoning nuclear weapons for its security". However, the situation today is quite different from that of the year when the six-party talks were held: Back then, North Korea was merely proposing a nuclear program in the future, but now it has developed real nuclear weapons, and therefore there has been a dramatic increase in the bargain chips held by North Korea; back then North Korea adhered to its "Military First" politics, but now it has explicitly proposed ending its "parallel pursuit of both economic and nuclear force development" and shall then concentrate on developing the economy and improving people's livelihood. The question arises whether North Korea's current shift in its policies should be considered as a strategic change or a tactic change, and personally I think both of these possibilities make sense. However, the final tendency of the North Korea nuclear issue not only depends on the motives of North Korea, but also on North Korea's interaction with other parties, especially the United States.

In the next two or three years, there could be four possible prospects for the North Korea nuclear issue and the security situation on the Korean

Peninsula which can be illustrated as follows.

I. The US-North Korea dialogue shall gradually make substantial progress, and the verifiable nuclear freeze by North Korea shall then be achieved, which could then open the door to multilateral dialogues and denuclearization based on the two-track approach.

The primary task for the follow-up dialogues between the United States and North Korea is to develop a package plan that involves a general road map and timetable, including the achievement of the denuclearization of North Korea and the establishment of a peace mechanism on the Korean Peninsula. Otherwise, the denuclearization will only remain an empty talk. However, there is still a big gap between the US and North Korean positions on the issue of denuclearization. The United States strongly urges the goal of “Complete, Verifiable and Irreversible Dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear weapons and nuclear program” (CVID) be achieved with a specific package deal as soon as possible; North Korea has proposed to achieve the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (need to change formatting)with “phased and synchronized measures.” In this case, what may be put on the agenda in the first place will be North Korea’s freeze on its nuclear weapons and program. This can be achieved either before the package deal is reached or as the first step in implementing the package deal.

At present, North Korea has made remarkable efforts towards the realization of its freeze on nuclear weapons. However, the nuclear freeze requires the cessation of all nuclear activities in North Korea, which includes the cessation of nuclear material production, the operation of nuclear facilities and the development of nuclear technology, in addition a detailed list of nuclear sites must be submitted for declaration and verification. It is still unknown whether North Korea can finally accept the verification measures. At the end of 2008, the final round of the six-party talks broke down due to the fact that the United States and North Korea failed to reach an agreement on the verification measures. At the same time, an appropriate return shall also be given to North Korea on its nuclear freeze. North Korea has always adhered to its “tit-for-tat” policy, and it is bound to demand that the United States and other relevant parties lift some sanctions against North Korea. However, the US position still remains that it will not lift the relevant sanctions until North Korea completely abandons its nuclear program. It is still unknown to the international community whether North Korea can accept this condition or not.

If the United States and North Korea can make the necessary mutual compromises, North Korea agrees to allow an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)-led verification to be carried out within the framework of the international law, and the United States agrees to offer North Korea appropriate returns, then it is possible for the two sides to reach an agreement on the nuclear freeze and gradually make substantial progress on this issue with the active cooperation of the international community. This will be the best prospect that may emerge in the next two or three years.

II. The US-North Korea dialogue shall break down, North Korea shall resume all its nuclear tests, and the situation on the Korean Peninsula will become worse and more tense . As a result, the United States shall be determined to carry out a limited military strike against North Korea and shall further cause the outbreak of military conflicts and even wars on the Korean Peninsula.

At present, the main challenges facing the US-North Korea dialogue could be illustrated as follows. First, there is almost no mutual trust of any degree between the United States and North Korea. Second, while Kim Jong-un can be arbitrary at his will, Donald Trump is subject to the domestic politics of the United States, and the solution to North Korea nuclear issue is likely to be criticized and opposed by Congress and the hard-line conservative wing in the future. The fact that right before the Singapore Summit, the National Security Advisor of the United States John R. Bolton and other hard-line conservatives proposed to solve the North Korea nuclear issue with the “Libya model” is a harbinger for this opposition. Third, North Korea will never easily abandon its nuclear program. It will most likely bargain with the United States as a new nuclear power and raise the stakes far higher than it did in the previous six-party talks. These factors are combined together and may cause the US-North Korea dialogue to break down again.

Once the dialogue breaks down and North Korea restarts its nuclear tests, the likelihood of a limited military strike against North Korea by the United States will increase dramatically. Since Donald Trump took office in 2017, the United States has comprehensively stepped up its preparations for the use of force, especially the limited use of force against North Korea. A vivid expression at that time was “to launch a ‘bloody nose’ attack”. Once North Korea restarts its nuclear tests, it will probably touch the red line of the United States which stipulates that North Korea is not allowed to have

the capabilities to conduct any nuclear attack on the United States. Under these circumstances, the United States shall use force against North Korea to defend itself rather than defending its allies.

Despite the opposition from South Korea, the United States may still take military actions. In addition, Donald Trump does not play safe cards. He wants to make a big deal with Kim Jong-un and gamble on this issue. It is still hard to tell whether Donald Trump will choose to take risks when he finds out that the US-North Korea dialogue has completely failed to reach his goal.

The use of force by the United States against North Korea, even just a limited military strike as a warning, is highly likely to cause the outbreak of a large-scale military conflict or even a nuclear war. There is still no concrete answer as to whether there will be a partial or a full-scale war, a short-term war or a long-term war by then, whether the war is limited to the Korean Peninsula only or shall spread to the East Asia, and whether China will be involved in the war or not. Of course, there is one possibility that should not be ruled out: in the face of limited military strikes by the United States (such as intercepting North Korean missile tests, attacking North Korean missile launchers and launching cyber warfare), North Korea will not conduct any military counter-attack in order to avoid the war or only symbolically launch a few counter-attacks. But even so, this will further worsen the situation on the Korean Peninsula and bring the United States and North Korea to the brink of a war.

In short, the use of force by the United States against North Korea is so far the worst prospect for this issue. However, since China and Russia resolutely oppose the use of force to resolve the North Korea nuclear issue, and the limited conflicts may further escalate into a major war, it is not very likely for the United States to take firm military actions. Therefore, the probability of this prospect is not high.

III. With the breakdown of the US-North Korea dialogues and due to the significant risks of war, the two sides will not move towards military conflicts and wars but rather remain in a more serious military confrontation.

Under these circumstances, North Korea will continue to advance its nuclearization process and carry out the combat deployment of its nuclear weapons. In order to safeguard the security of the United States and its allies, maintain the credibility of the regional bilateral military alliances

and prevent both Japan and South Korea from developing nuclear weapons, the United States will strengthen its deterrence and containment of North Korea, strengthen its extended deterrence against the allies (by means of conventional deterrence and nuclear umbrella) and further strengthen the regional missile defense system. The United States will even consider redeploying its tactical nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula and adopting a nuclear-sharing policy implemented in Europe during the Cold War.

In this situation, the US-North Korea relations will become more hostile, and the easing of tensions between South Korea and North Korea will become unsustainable. North Korea's ambition to develop its economy and improve people's livelihood will eventually become a bubble. In the event of serious natural disasters, North Korea may also face the eruption of a series of profound internal crises. There will be more uncertainty in terms of the relations between China and Russia as one side and the United States, Japan and South Korea as another side. The United States will vigorously strengthen the ties with its military alliances and develop its missile defense systems, which will inevitably aggravate security concerns of China and Russia and force China and Russia to take necessary counter-measures. In the face of the heightened military confrontation, there shall be a high risk of military conflicts caused by miscalculations or accidental discharges. There is a high possibility of the emergence of this scenario.

IV. On condition that North Korea has made certain concessions, the United States shall tacitly acquiesce to the North Korea's status as a nuclear power and make compromises with North Korea. The North Korea nuclear issue shall then follow the same pattern as the India-Pakistan nuclear issue.

The limited concessions from North Korea shall include the following matters. North Korea shall halt all its nuclear tests, especially its Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) tests, officially announce that it would not use nuclear weapons in the first place, stop engaging in nuclear proliferation and accept long-term US military presence on the Korean Peninsula. At present, the probability of the emergence of such a prospect is low. However, once the United States is determined to focus on dealing with the so-called "strategic competitions" from China and Russia, and especially if the Sino-US relations deteriorate seriously and North Korea takes the opportunity to improve its relations with the United States, the prospect for

a compromise reached between the United States and North Korea is likely to emerge. Of course, some people could also make the opposite assumption that North Korea may move closer to China, that the Sino-North Korea relations shall be further improved, and that China shall greatly re-adjust its policies regarding the North Korea nuclear issue.

Once the North Korea nuclear issue follows the pattern of India-Pakistan nuclear issue, it will surely have an extremely serious impact on the international nuclear non-proliferation regime and even cause this regime to collapse. As a result, there will be more nuclear powers surrounding China. Will South Korea and Japan develop their nuclear weapons? Will Iran and other Middle Eastern countries follow suit? The security situation in East Asia will also deteriorate due to massive nuclear proliferation. There will be more intense and longer-term arms race among countries.

Based on the above forecast and analysis, it can be seen that in the next few years, there is still great uncertainty in terms of the North Korea nuclear issue as well as the opportunities and challenges facing the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, it is not advisable to be either overly optimistic or overly pessimistic about this issue. China should make the utmost efforts to achieve the best prospects and prevent the worst-case scenario from happening. These efforts should mainly include the following.

First, China should make efforts to continue to improve and develop relations with both South Korea and North Korea, actively support and promote the North-South Korean dialogue and the North-South Korea reconciliation process, and strive to play an irreplaceable and important role in assisting North Korea in achieving its national strategic transformation.

Second, China should actively support the efforts by the United States and North Korea to reach an agreement on “phased, synchronized measures and a package deal” for achieving the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, strive to implement a verifiable nuclear freeze and the defunctionalization of some nuclear facilities in North Korea, promote the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as well as the establishment of a security and peace mechanism on the Korean Peninsula.

Third, China should actively involve itself in the US-North Korea dialogue that enters the stage of substantive negotiations, and further propose China’s suggestions regarding the road map and timetable for achieving the denuclearization; with the gradual and actual progress made in the issue of denuclearization, China should play an active role in many

aspects including verifying North Korea's nuclear freeze, handling the sanctions against North Korea, guaranteeing the security of North Korea and coordinating the positions of all parties involved.

Fourth, China should then make serious efforts to promote the development of bilateral dialogues towards multilateral dialogues, strive to sign the peace treaty on the Korean Peninsula through the China-US-Inter Korean four-party dialogue, promote the establishment of the Northeast Asia Security Cooperation Organization through the reboot of the six-party talks, and play an important role in the process of establishing a regional multilateral security mechanism.

Fifth, China should fully prepare for the possible result that the US-North Korea dialogue may end in deadlock or even break down again. If such a prospect emerges, China should then make appropriate adjustments to its relevant policies based on the reasons for the breakdown of the dialogue and the rights and wrongs of the issue. China shall also continue to strengthen its crisis management and control and fully prepare itself for all the possible military conflicts, wars and nuclear safety and security crises.

Sixth, in the face of a more complicated situation that may occur on the Korean Peninsula, China must also be prepared to fully respond to this situation. China should adhere to its basic policy of "achieving the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and opposing the 'war and chaos' on the Korean Peninsula"; China should also resolutely carry out forceful, reasonable and favorable struggle against any policy and behaviour adopted by the United States and its allies that may endanger China's national interests. China should then learn from the lessons of the past that its relations with both North and South Korea on the Korean Peninsula all experienced deterioration during certain times, properly handle the relations with both North and South Korea, and especially strengthen its ability to manage and control the gap and differences among all parties involved.

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