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How to Strengthen the Sino-ROK Crisis Management

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Crisis management is a new and important subject between China and Republic of Korea (ROK). Study on the Sino-ROK crisis management can strengthen the crisis management awareness of leaders and relevant functional departments of both countries and thus establish and perfect the bilateral crisis management mechanism, which is of great significance for both countries to duly handle their security differences and emergencies, to jointly cope with major regional security challenges and to maintain a healthy and stable development of the bilateral relations.

I. Crisis Factors in the Sino-ROK Security Relations

Sino-ROK relations have achieved great progress after the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992. Meanwhile, the exchange and cooperation in defense and security have been gradually strengthened. However, security relations have always been a weakness in the Sino-ROK relations.

The most severe security challenge between China and ROK comes from the long-term antagonism between the U.S., ROK and DPRK, as well as the North Korean nuclear issue and nuclear crisis it generates. In 2017, the North Korean nuclear crisis was even pushed to the verge of conflict and war. China and ROK have extensive common interests and consensus about how to cope with the North Korean nuclear crisis, but there are also disagreements, some of which are even serious ones. Two years ago, THAAD Crisis, in which the U.S. deployed “THAAD”(Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) on the South Korean territory, was actually triggered by the North Korean nuclear crisis, which severely impaired the bilateral relations between China and ROK in such fields as politics, security, diplomacy, and even economy and culture.

The Taiwan issue is also a factor threatening the Sino-ROK relations. The U.S. has long been dipping his hands in the Taiwan issue. If a crisis and even a conflict breaks out in the Taiwan Strait between China and the U.S., ROK, as an ally of America, will face a tough choice: if ROK sides with America, its relations with China will be severely damaged.

Besides, China and ROK have delimitation disputes over the exclusive economic zone (including the dispute over Suyan Islet) and fishery disputes for a long time. In recent years, due to the overlapping of Air Defense Identification Zone, military aircrafts respectively belonging to China and ROK once met in the sky, which led to some frictions. These disputes, if not well dealt with, may also lead to emergencies and crises.

II. Positive Changes of the Crisis Factors between China and ROK

Since Moon Jae-in came to office as President of ROK in the spring of 2017, China and ROK have gradually resumed dialogues, made high-level contacts and controlled the THAAD Crisis through confidence-building measures (CBM). Especially, by cooperating to promote the peace and stability, as well as the denuclearization of the Peninsula,

Sino-ROK relations have been back on track and will continue to advance in a stable and better direction. Currently, the THAAD issue still exists, but it's no longer in the crisis state. Besides, the maritime disputes between the two countries also present a relatively peaceful posture.

In 2018, the environment on the Korean Peninsula has witnessed positive and significant changes. First, north-south relations have been obviously improved. ROK and DPRK comprehensively resumed the dialogue and held three summits with the resolve to jointly denuclearize the Korean Peninsula and safeguard its lasting peace and prosperity. In terms of military security, the two sides resumed the general-level dialogue and signed a military pact in an effort to achieve a full cessation of hostilities that might lead to military tensions and clashes in all spaces of the ground, sea and air, which is a significant progress in the military risk control and arms control. Such circumstances make it much less likely for ROK and DPRK to have military crises and clashes. Second, the North Korean nuclear crisis is mitigated. The top leader of DPRK has changed the stance of “never abandoning nuclear” and made it clear that DPRK is willing to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula and concentrate on economic development on condition that the security is guaranteed and a peace mechanism is established. Afterwards, the U.S. and DPRK resumed contacts and dialogues and had a historic summit in June this year, in which a consensus over the issues of the U.S.-DPRK new relations, lasting peace and complete denuclearization of the peninsula was reached. Against this backdrop, both the U.S. and DPRK have taken important alleviating measures: DPRK stopped nuclear tests and missile tests, destroyed a nuclear test site and dismantled a missile engine test site; while the U.S. and ROK suspended their large-scale joint military exercise.

However, it's worth noting that after Kim Jong-un and Trump met in Singapore in June 2018, the follow-up dialogues between the two countries fell into a deadlock. DPRK required America to jointly

announce the end of the war state and to ease its sanctions on DPRK; while America insisted that DPRK should first submit a comprehensive denuclearization list, and claimed that the sanctions will not be lifted before the denuclearization is realized. Nevertheless, at present both countries still maintain contact and a second summit is expected early next year. Both sides want to break the ice and continue to promote the peninsula's denuclearization.

Moreover, Sino-DPRK and Russia-DPRK relations have much improved this year. Three summits between China and DPRK have been held in the short term. Putin invited Kim Jong-un to visit Russia. Japan and DPRK also resumed contacts and are discussing the possibility of a top leaders' meeting. All these developments have contributed to easing the North Korean nuclear crisis.

In short, as the tension on the Peninsula is eased, it's much less likely that China and ROK will be involved in a crisis because of the North Korean nuclear crisis and military clashes on the Peninsula. On the contrary, in the promotion of the peninsula's denuclearization and the establishment of peace mechanism, both sides will enjoy a broader prospect for cooperation. In the future, if the denuclearization can be gradually carried forward, the possibility of Sino-ROK crisis induced by the North Korean nuclear crisis will be further reduced.

III. Potential Crisis Factors in the Sino-ROK Relations

Looking ahead, the security differences and potential crisis factors between China and ROK will still exist, some of which might be highlighted again with the development of the regional security environment.

Firstly, what concerns us most is another breakout of the North Korean nuclear crisis. Since the 1990s, the North Korean nuclear crisis has broken out three times, each severer and lasting longer than the previous one. In the face of a rare historic opportunity right now,

experts from different countries widely believe that if the U.S.-DPRK dialogue fails again, the situations on the Peninsula might take a turn for the worse. By then, if DPRK resumes nuclear tests and missile test-firings, it's very likely that America will conduct a surgical-type military strike against DPRK. And once DPRK strikes back, the military conflict might lose control and a large-scale military clash and even war on the Peninsula might break out, which may even affect areas outside of the Peninsula.

Of course, since DPRK possesses a certain nuclear deterrent, it's too risky to launch a military strike, so instead of a direct military strike against DPRK, America and its allies might further strengthen their military deterrence and containment against DPRK. Joint military exercise between the U.S. and ROK is more threatening for DPRK. Such situation will become an enhanced version of the severe military confrontation on the Peninsula in 2017. Under such circumstances, the tensions between ROK and DPRK or between America and DPRK will remain high, and a possible military conflict and war can't be ruled out, either.

In addition, it's also possible that, in order to contain China, in the context that DPRK implements comprehensive nuclear freezing or partial denuclearization, and especially abandons the further development of transcontinental ballistic missile plan, a compromise might be made between America and DPRK, by which a limited nuclear capability might be allowed for the latter. Whether this prospect is a transition state or a long-term state, the domino effect is to be expected, which will greatly impact the international nuclear non-proliferation mechanism, putting Asia and the whole world in more risks of nuclear proliferation, nuclear safety and nuclear security.

In a word, a repeat of the North Korean nuclear crisis, in whatever form it may present, will bring severe challenges to the Sino-ROK security relations.

Secondly, close attention should also be paid to the future situation in the Taiwan Strait. Since Trump was sworn in as American president, America's policy towards Taiwan has changed a lot. Several Taiwan-related acts passed by the U.S. Congress and signed by Trump have exerted strong impact on the "One-China Principle". If the Trump administration puts these acts into practice and openly crosses China's red line in the future, it will not only lead to a major crisis in the Taiwan Strait but also bring serious trouble to the Sino-ROK relations.

Furthermore, since disputes over the sea and airspace between China and ROK will remain for a long term, high alert should be kept on for risks that they may bring about.

IV. Recommendations for the Sino-ROK Crisis Management

The primary task of China and ROK is to vigorously step up the cooperation on denuclearization, economic development and non-traditional security. Under this premise, both sides should undertake strong measures to carry forward the construction of Sino-ROK crisis management mechanism as the Sino-ROK relations are taking a turn for the better, making positive and far-sighted efforts for an effective control over the security differences and latent crisis existing in the bilateral relations.

The following are some specific recommendations for the Sino-ROK crisis management:

First, both sides should, as soon as possible, comprehensively resume and strengthen the multiple dialogue mechanisms on diplomacy, defense and security (military) established before, and crisis management should be included in the dialogue as an important subject. The dialogue between the head of China's State Council who are in charge of the diplomatic issues and the chief of the National Security Office at ROK's Blue House, national defense strategic dialogue and dialogue of the Combined Chiefs of Staff should especially undertake the mission of

strengthening the Sino-ROK security crisis management.

Second, both sides should learn the lesson from the past practice that “the hotline is not hot” and further identify the crisis management function of the hotlines between the diplomatic and defense ministries of the two countries, ensuring that urgent communication can be made in the crisis. In addition to the high-level hotlines, both sides should also give full play to the hotlines between the navy and air force (in November 2008, China and ROK opened hotlines between the navy and air force divisions as well as between troops of Operations Command). In the future, a hotline between the top leaders of China and ROK should also be taken into account.

Third, both sides should strive to reach a consensus on the basic principles of crisis management in the top leaders’ meetings as well as the diplomatic and defense and security dialogues. For example, both countries should “always maintain an unobstructed communication channel and give clear signs”, “make roughly equivalent response rather than great escalation”, “take a full account of the possible response of the opposite side before taking any major actions”, and “resolve the crisis and settle them one by one”.

Fourth, both sides should lay emphasis on both crisis management and crisis prevention and aversion. Confidence-building measures should be further strengthened aiming at the security concerns of both countries. The priority should be given to the establishment of a bilateral code of conduct for air and naval operations as well as a communication mechanism for major military actions. Besides, both sides should also resume and maintain the dialogues on issues of air defense identification zone of the two countries.

Fifth, both sides should resume and strengthen the negotiation over the maritime delimitation as soon as possible, for its progress and success will play a significant role in reducing and even finally resolving the Sino-ROK maritime disputes and avoiding maritime emergencies.

Sixth, when advancing the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, both sides should have dialogues and consultations over the emergencies and unexpected events that may arise on the Peninsula so as to formulate necessary response plans. When it comes to the issues of the Taiwan Strait, both sides should firmly insist on “the One-China Principle”.

Seventh, both sides should actively establish a dialogue cooperation mechanism for non-traditional security so as to enhance the bilateral cooperation in the handling of emergencies in this area, which will be beneficial for enhancing the mutual security trust and accumulating experience of security cooperation. Such cooperation should never be suspended easily under any circumstances.

Eighth, both sides should stick to and strengthen the “Track-II” and “Track 1.5” security dialogue and the crisis management dialogue for they can complement and explore the ways for intergovernmental “Track-I” dialogue.

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