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How to Understand North Korea’s Demand for the Withdrawal of ROK-U.S. “hostile policy”¹

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Recently, North Korea has been demanding that South Korea and the U.S. withdraw their hostile policy toward North Korea. In a speech at the 5th Meeting of the 14th Supreme People’s Assembly on September 2021, Chairman Kim Jong Un (hereafter Kim Jong Un) referred to an end-of-war declaration promoted by the current South Korean government stating that “hostile viewpoint and policies” should first be removed before declaring the end of war. The North Korean regime has continuously claimed that the hostile policy of South Korea and the U.S. is the biggest obstacle to peace on the Korean Peninsula and that denuclearization can only be achieved when it is removed first.

What does North Korea mean by the hostile policy of South Korea and the U.S.? The withdrawal of the U.S. hostile policy toward the regime means the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea, which is an obstacle to achieving the unification of the Korean Peninsula under its control. Since the very existence of a free and prosperous ROK is the political threat to his regime, in order to stabilize his system of one-man rule, it is necessary for Kim Jong Un to remove such a threat through the unification of Korea under a communist flag. However, the biggest obstacle to achieving this is the ROK-U.S. alliance and U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK). Kim Jong Un calls for the removal of this “hostile policy” because he believes that his ultimate objective of unifying the Korean Peninsula under communism can be achieved as soon as U.S. troops are withdrawn from the Peninsula, as in Vietnam and Afghanistan. According to Bob Woodward’s 2020 book, *Rage*, Kim Jong Un wrote in a letter to President Trump that “Now and in the future, the South Korean military cannot be my enemy

¹ This is to inform you that this manuscript can be revised in part.

... that “the South Korean military is no match against my military.” It shows that Kim Jong Un bluntly demanded the withdrawal of USFK, the biggest obstacle to the unification of the Korean Peninsula under a communist flag.

China emphasizes its alliance with Pyongyang as being forged in blood, referring to the Korean War as a war to “Resist U.S. aggression and Aid Korea.” Their 1961 ‘Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance’ stipulates that “In the event of one of the contracting parties being subjected to armed attack by any state or several states jointly and thus being involved in a state of war, the other contracting party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal,” which means automatic intervention.

In July 2017, when North Korea tested missiles capable of hitting the U.S. mainland such as the Hwasong-12 and 14, President Trump threatened to unleash “Fire and Fury” and hinted a possible military attack on North Korea. As tensions escalated on the Korean Peninsula, with North Korea launching the Hwasong-15 and the U.S. reviewing the so-called “bloody nose” pre-emptive strike option in November, China deployed more than 100,000 troops along the border with North Korea and prepared to support North Korea in case of contingency. The fact that China is right across the Yalu River and thus poised to intervene militarily in North Korea whenever it wants, while the U.S. is very far away across the Pacific Ocean, shows how unstable South Korea’s security environment is.

This is similar to the recent situation in Ukraine. Russia has assembled more than 100,000 troops on the border with Ukraine and is prepared to invade at any time. Mr. Robert Lee at King’s College London, a Russia expert, said that “If Russia really wants to unleash its conventional capabilities, they could inflict massive damage in a very short period of time.” He forecasted that “They can devastate the Ukrainian military in the east really quickly, within the first 30-40 minutes.” To a certain extent, the situation in Ukraine seems to be similar to that of the Korean Peninsula.

It is the North Korean regime, not South Korea, that pursues a hostile policy. Since the Armistice in 1953, North Korea has carried out more than 3,000 provocations – big and small – against South Korea, and whenever tensions arose, it frequently threatened to turn Seoul into a “sea of fire.” As soon as the post-war recovery period was over following the Armistice Agreement in 1953, North Korea resumed its

military buildup, chanting the slogan “a gun in one hand, and a hammer and sickle in the other” at the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) in 1962. At the Plenum, it also adopted the ‘Four Military Guidelines’: arm the entire populace, fortify the whole country, train the entire army as a “Cadre Force”, and modernize the army. In 1968 and 1969, North Korea carried out major provocations that threatened to plunge the entire Korean Peninsula into an all-out war, such as the Blue House (Presidential Office) raid, the capture of U.S. Navy intelligence ship Pueblo, the infiltration operations in Uljin and Samcheok, and the shootdown of American EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft. Shortly after South Vietnam fell to communism in 1975, Kim Il Sung requested military assistance from China, arguing that the South Korean people “have only a demarcation line to lose but reunification to gain.” Such statements and actions contradict North Korea’s assertion that it is South Korea and the U.S. that are pursuing a ‘hostile policy.’ The regime now has nuclear weapons and has become more aggressive and is threatening South Korea without hesitation.

The contradictions of North Korea's demand for the U.S. to withdraw its hostile policy can be found in its development of nuclear weapons. South Korea does not possess nuclear weapons, and the U.S. withdrew all of its tactical nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula in 1991. In 1994, under the Geneva Agreed Framework, North Korea promised to implement measures under the Joint Declaration of Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and to comply with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. It further agreed to abandon all existing nuclear programs and promptly return to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and IAEA safeguards in the Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks on September 19, 2005. However, North Korea violated all these promises and agreements by continuously developing nuclear weapons and has focused on upgrading its nuclear weapon capabilities through six nuclear tests so far. As of 2021, the regime has intensively strengthened its nuclear capabilities that can primarily target South Korea. North Korea’s development of ‘cutting-edge tactical nuclear weapons’ against South Korea, who has no nuclear weapon, shows how deceptive North Korea’s call for the withdrawal of ‘hostile policy’ is.

In a recent column, Dr. Victor Cha, Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), pointed out that U.S. presidents and senior officials have

offered assurances of non-hostile intent on at least 40 separate occasions since 1989. For example, in June 1993 joint communique between the U.S. and North Korea, the United States provided “assurance against the threat and use of force, including nuclear weapons.” In the October 1994 U.S.-North Korea Agreed Framework, the United States agreed to provide “formal assurance to North Korea, against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the U.S.” In 2002, President George W. Bush stated that “We have no intention of invading North Korea.” President Obama said in November 2009, “The United States is prepared to offer North Korea a different future . . . it could have a future of greater security and respect.” After the Singapore Summit with Kim Jong Un in June 2018, President Trump stated, “Yesterday’s conflict does not have to be tomorrow’s war. And as history has proven over and over again, adversaries can become friends.”

Although we hope for the denuclearization of North Korea, it seems that North Korea will never give up its nuclear weapons. According to a 2021 poll conducted by the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), 90 percent of South Koreans said North Korea will not denuclearize. A CNN poll conducted right after the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore in 2018 also showed that 70% of Americans believe that North Korea will not denuclearize. This is because nuclear weapons are the key means by which North Korea’s hereditary dictatorship can survive and eventually force South Korea to submit to unification under a communist flag. According to a joint research conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies and the RAND Corporation in 2021, the current situation will continue and North Korea could have up to 242 nuclear weapons by 2027. In that case, the report estimates that more than 60 North Korean nuclear weapons could be used against South Korea alone in the initial phase of a war. Instead of denuclearization, North Korea will try to make a deal with the U.S. through nuclear blackmail and be able to control South Korea. Since North Korea will not abandon its nuclear program, South Korea’s survival can only be guaranteed when South Korea is prepared for it. Like the Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) of the Cold War era, we should respond to nuclear North Korea by achieving a ‘Balance of Terror,’ but have yet to do so.

Very worrisome is the U.S. position on the “No First Use (NFU)” policy which is being discussed recently. Until now, the U.S. has maintained the position that it does not rule out the possibility of a preemptive use of nuclear weapons to counter an

adversary's imminent nuclear attack and to enhance deterrence by making the adversary unaware of when the U.S. will use nuclear weapons. However, the Biden administration sees nuclear weapons as a means to deter the use of nuclear weapons, not a weapon to be used, and is reportedly re-considering the NFU. If the NFU becomes an official position of the U.S., North Korea may misjudge that the U.S. extended deterrence promise is faltering, and South Korea will be in a situation where it may depend on North Korea's favor for its survival.

While we need to pursue the denuclearization of North Korea in the long-term, we must first strengthen the ROK-U.S. readiness posture to counter the North Korean nuclear threat. No matter how advanced they are, conventional weapons are just conventional weapons and cannot provide the political and psychological effects that nuclear weapons have. Based on the fact that nuclear weapons can only be deterred by nuclear weapons, a Korean version of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) must be formulated and implemented. The key is to make North Korea realize that it will lose more than it can gain if it uses nuclear weapons against South Korea.

We must establish a multi-layered defense system capable of intercepting North Korean nuclear weapons and also possess capabilities to destroy North Korea if it uses nuclear weapons. We should announce that the 1992 Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula has become a dead document due to North Korea's nuclear development. We need to pursue ROK-U.S. nuclear sharing and the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, as it was recommended by the House Armed Service Committee in an amendment to the fiscal 2013 National Defense Authorization bill. We must accumulate operational experience on nuclear weapons by establishing a plan for the actual use of nuclear weapons and conducting relevant drills. The redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons does not imply giving up on the denuclearization of North Korea; rather, this would serve as an opportunity to achieve denuclearization and make the North abandon its hostile policy towards South Korea.