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Outlook for North Korea Policy under the Second Trump Administration and Its implications on South Korea

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On November 5, Donald Trump, the Republican candidate, was elected as the 47th U.S. president, and this is expected to bring significant changes to foreign policy compared to the Biden administration. Trump's foreign policy is the epitome of great power politics which focuses on deals between dominant powers and the pursuit of U.S. national interests without consideration for the positions of other countries and imposes the same stance on its allies. The problem is that Trump expressed support for the revival of direct U.S.-North Korea negotiations and expressed an amicable view of Kim Jong Un during his campaign. This raises the possibility that he may pursue his North Korea policy without coordination and cooperation with South Korea.

Outlook on Foreign and North Korea Policy Under the Second Trump Administration

The Republican Party's foreign policy direction, encapsulated in the slogan "Make America Great Again (MAGA)," in the recent election, encompassed pure isolationism, selective interventionism, and interventionism. President-elect Trump appears to adopt an approach that compromises between pure isolationism and selective interventionism. While President-elect Trump will continue to prioritize the U.S.-China strategic competition, he is likely to emphasize "fair" cost-sharing from U.S. allies who support him rather than strengthening security commitments to them. At times, he may also seek deals with dictators under authoritarian regimes in the name of advancing U.S. interests.

Even during the recent presidential election, Trump tried to attack the Biden administration's diplomatic incompetence by repeatedly emphasizing that he had an amicable relationship with Kim Jong Un. Trump also vowed in his November 6 victory speech to stop the wars, which

was primarily alluding to the Ukraine War but showed that he could strike deals with anyone to advance U.S. interests.

However, there are three facilitating and limiting factors simultaneously regarding the likelihood of early negotiations between the second Trump administration and North Korea. The first facilitating factor is President-elect Trump's confidence. He has frequently emphasized that he knew Kim Jong Un well and skillfully handled him, and the re-election may have increased his confidence. Second, there is a good chance that there are no advisors to restrict him. Drawing on the experiences of his first administration, Trump may not appoint advisors who would challenge his views in his second administration, potentially leading to more unilateral decision-making. Third, for Trump, who views the alliance as a transaction, U.S.-North Korea negotiations may be seen as leverage. He might think that the progress of U.S.-North Korea relations could enhance the United States' strategic maneuvering room by holding sway over both North and South Korea.

On the other hand, there are equally significant constraints. The biggest constraint is that North Korea policy is not so high priority for the second Trump administration. Its foreign policy priorities are expected to focus on gaining an upper hand in the U.S.-China strategic competition, an early end to the Ukraine war, eliminating anti-U.S. and anti-Israel forces in the Middle East in the wake of the Israel-Hamas war, and significantly reducing Iran's influence. For the time being, these are the areas that his second administration will focus its diplomatic capabilities on. Another constraint is the experience of "No-deal in Hanoi Summit" and the consequent distrust of Kim Jong Un. During Trump's first administration, top-down negotiations with North Korea were highlighted for a year, from early 2018 until the "no-deal" outcome. No further progress was made for two years after the breakdown of the U.S.-North Korea working-level talks in Stockholm in October 2019. Having experienced Kim Jong Un and North Korea's behavior, Trump may find it challenging to make significant concessions compared to the Stockholm talks in order to negotiate with North Korea. Finally, the deepening North Korea-Russia alignment has already progressed considerably. Trump expressed displeasure at China's potential influence over U.S.-North Korea relations when China held three summits with North Korea around the time of the 2018 U.S.-North Korea Singapore Summit. Similar sentiments could arise with the current North Korea-Russia alignment.

However, it would be difficult for North Korea and Russia to abruptly reverse the momentum of their year-long deepening ties.

In this regard, the second Trump administration is unlikely to rush into a U.S.-North Korea summit, instead leaving room for dialogue and engaging in behind-the-scenes contacts at the working level. However, unlike the Biden administration which emphasized deterrence through measures such as the Washington Declaration in response to the North Korean nuclear threat, the second Trump administration may react indifferently toward strengthening deterrence or demand South Korea to pay in return. Moreover, while the Biden administration maintained its stance of not tolerating North Korea's nuclear weapons at least outwardly regarding the conditions for negotiations with North Korea, it cannot be ruled out that the second Trump administration will ease some of the sanctions against North Korea during working-level negotiations on the condition that North Korea stops developing nuclear and missile capabilities that threaten the U.S. mainland. In this case, there is a danger that North Korea's status as a nuclear state will become a *fait accompli* by conducting U.S.-North Korea negotiations while North Korea maintains its nuclear capabilities threatening the Korean Peninsula.

Projections on North Korea's Future Behavior

North Korea has not responded much to Trump's election victory so far, but the possibility of a personal letter from Kim Jong Un or a secret line of communication between President-elect Trump's advisors and the North Korean regime cannot be ruled out. From North Korea's perspective, the Trump administration is likely to be an easier counterpart. While North Korea may not achieve sanctions relief or aid through negotiations with the United States, it might aim to undermine the ROK-U.S. alliance and amplify divisions within the alliance.

Therefore, North Korea is expected to continue to raise tensions on the Korean Peninsula to highlight the failures of the Biden administration's North Korea policy before the inauguration of Trump's second administration on January 20, 2025. However, the likelihood of a seventh nuclear test is lower than if Harris had been elected. If a nuclear test is carried out ahead of the inauguration of the second Trump administration, it can be regarded as a hostile intention

against Trump who has declared a great America, and could provoke a return to the “Fire & Fury 2.0” approach seen in August 2017 under Trump’s first administration. However, there is a possibility that North Korea will conduct a nuclear test using the “Hwasan-31” tactical nuclear warhead, which it revealed in March 2023. This could be intended to imply that the “Hwasong-19” ballistic missile, which North Korea declared to be the “final ICBM” and launched on 31 October, has multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle (MIRV) capabilities. This is because the “Hwasan-31” is a means of symbolizing the securing of North Korea’s tactical nuclear capabilities, and used as MIRV warheads, it can be mounted on ICBMs. In this case, North Korea could choose to freeze its ICBM arsenal aimed at the United States while retaining its tactical nuclear capabilities targeting the Korean Peninsula through a deal with the second Trump administration in the future.

However, provocations against South Korea may continue or even escalate in the future. This is because they can reinforce the “relationship between two belligerent states” that North Korea has been emphasizing both domestically and internationally since 2023 while maximizing the perception among its people of the inter-Korean disconnection and insulation. Through this, North Korea will plot to exploit gaps in South Korea-U.S. relations over North Korea policy from the outset of the second Trump administration.

Moreover, North Korea is highly likely to demand the suspension or postponement of ROK-U.S. combined exercises through North Korean media or behind-the-scenes contacts with the United States ahead of the inauguration of the second Trump administration. This is because there is a precedent for such demand during Trump’s first administration, and it has the effect of weakening the combined readiness of the ROK-U.S. combined forces. Additionally, North Korea may also assert that if the United States wishes to negotiate, it should withdraw the “Washington Declaration” while halting the establishment of the “Conventional-Nuclear Integration (CNI),” which refers to the integration between South Korea’s conventional response capabilities and the U.S. nuclear capabilities.

Undoubtedly, North Korea has its own concerns. First of all, as previously pointed out, initiating U.S.-North Korea negotiations would require recalibrating or easing its close

alignment with Russia. For Pyongyang, this means it should take the risk of clinging to U.S.-North Korea negotiations whose outcomes are uncertain, rather than on Russia, which currently provides immediate economic and military support. Kim Jong Un may have no option but to tone down his stance toward President-elect Trump during the negotiation process, as he did in Singapore in 2018 and Hanoi in 2019. Moreover, Trump, who has secured control of both the Federal executives and Congress through the recent presidential election, would prefer such a dynamic. This would inevitably contradict Kim Jong Un's work of strengthening the internal power base—which has included elevating himself even to the point of partially denying his predecessors—and his self-idolization.

South Korea's Response

Considering North Korea policy under the second Trump administration and North Korea's responses, South Korea needs to respond by closely integrating South Korea's policies on the ROK-U.S. alliance and North Korea policies. First of all, the most fundamental solution to counter North Korea's attempts to drive a wedge between South Korea and the United States is to manage and strengthen the alliance based on the principle of paying a corresponding price for a "deal" between South Korea and the United States.

The highest priority for President-elect Trump regarding the ROK-U.S. alliance is that South Korea should significantly increase its "cost-sharing" contributions. The next priority is to expand the alliance's role, that is, to break away from its traditional focus on the Korean Peninsula to contribute to U.S.-China strategic competition. Issues such as the size of the USFK or combined military exercises are comparatively secondary. Considering these priorities, South Korea must propose bold measures such as offering a substantial increase in cost-sharing to uphold President-elect Trump's political standing. Additionally, South Korea should consider framing this increase as part of a broader "cost-sharing" agreement tied to the assured implementation of the U.S.'s "extended deterrence" commitments. For example, if the United States demands an increase in South Korea's share of defense cost-sharing, South Korea could propose establishing a new "Extended Deterrence Cost-Sharing Agreement" (tentative name) which includes nuclear-sharing arrangements between South Korea and the United States,

separate from the existing “Special Measures Agreement (SMA).” President-elect Trump may consider this proposal positively if South Korea pledges to pay an additional 50 percent of the projected 2025 defense cost-sharing amount (approximately 1.4 trillion KRW). Measures to expand the scope of the ROK-U.S. alliance beyond the Korean Peninsula, even in symbolic terms, would also help ease Trump’s frequent emphasis on the notion that the United States “protects” South Korea. Ultimately, these actions would signal South Korea’s willingness to actively contribute to the U.S.-China strategic competition.

It will be more persuasive if South Korea seeks to have its perspectives reflected in U.S.-North Korea relations based on this following approach. First, rather than trying to artificially link inter-Korean relations and the improvement of U.S.-North Korea relations, it is essential to maintain a somewhat detached stance on U.S.-North Korea relations. Additionally, it is important to persuade the United States that the idea of making North Korea virtually neutral through improved U.S.-North Korea relations will not be possible because North Korea, China, and Russia will eventually stand on the same side, as evidenced by the recent deepening North Korea-Russia alignment. Under these circumstances, the line of reasoning must be advocated that it is virtually impossible for North Korea to maintain its nuclear forces solely targeting the Korean Peninsula, and China and Russia will try to treat North Korea’s nuclear weapons as a common asset, therefore, North Korea’s nuclear weapons should not be tolerated, and nuclear security for South Korea should be strengthened to prevent its use. The issue of USFK presence or ROK-U.S. joint exercises can be rather easily resolved if these measures prove effective. In the case of combined exercises, even if some of them are suspended to negotiate with North Korea, serious deterioration of combined readiness will be prevented if measures such as strengthening the training of South Korean military training and guaranteeing the convenience of USFK use of training facilities in South Korea.

This communication should preferably take place in the form of summits or consultations between the heads of state rather than through other channels. South Korea must create as many opportunities as possible for early and frequent meetings at this level.

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