



China and North Korea Strengthen Bilateral Alignment via Shared Concept of "Denuclearization"

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NIDS コメンタリー

No. 100 August 30, 2019

Alignment, or alliance among nations, is based on common objectives rather than mutual friendship. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited North Korea, or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and "spoke highly of the DPRK side's efforts" to "promote the denuclearization of the Peninsula," according to a release by the Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on June 20, 2019. North Korea's definition of "denuclearization" is practically opposite to that used by neutral international laws such as the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Thus, support of North Korea's efforts toward "denuclearization" effectively means siding with North Korea's political position on this issue.

"Denuclearization" for Competing with the US-ROK Alliance

Had North Korea expressed its wish for NPT-compliant "denuclearization," China's support would simply be following predetermined, objective rules as opposed to arbitrary political decisions. However, during this last year, North Korea publicly confirmed that its denuclearization would not follow the NPT. At the third plenary meeting of the Seventh Central Committee (CC) of the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK), hosted by Kim Jong-Un in April 2018, a resolution was issued stating that the dismantlement of nuclear test sites was an important step for "worldwide disarmament." The NPT states that nations assuming the obligation of

worldwide disarmament are nuclear-weapon states, and non-nuclear-weapon states like North Korea are prohibited from seeking to acquire nuclear weapons regardless of worldwide denuclearization. If we assume that the WPK CC resolution means that North Korea will denuclearize itself as part of "worldwide disarmament," the concept of "denuclearization" arbitrarily defines North Korea as a nuclear-weapon state, thereby rejecting the non-proliferation. Indeed, like the demand for a nuclear-weapon state in the 1st article of the NPT, the resolution also required North Korea to refrain from transferring nuclear weapons or nuclear technology to others. By adopting the DPRK version of "denuclearization" that is not based on the NPT, President Xi effectively aligned with North Korea in future negotiations related to this issue.

This alignment likely stems from China sharing the DPRK's threat perception vis-à-vis the US Forces Korea (USFK). North Korea's "denuclearization" concept constitutes a part of its strategy to address the US presence in Korea. First, one condition North Korea insists upon in order to relinquish its nuclear weaponry is establishing a Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone (NWFZ), which will exclude the US extended nuclear deterrence for South Korea from the region.¹ Second, the North Korea's English translation of the Panmunjom Declaration, soon after the WPK CC resolution, said that two Koreas agreed on "turning the Korean Peninsula into a nuclear-free zone,"² despite the fact that neither the original Korean text nor South

Korea's English translation reflected such an agreement. In addition, through "denuclearization," North Korea's NWFZ idea aims to deny the legitimacy not only of US nuclear assets but also of conventional US presence. According to the DPRK government's statement on July 6, 2016, which it made in the midst of a series of nuclear and missile tests that had spanned two years by the end of 2017, "all the nukes and their bases should be dismantled," and "the withdrawal of the U.S. troops holding the right to use nukes from south Korea should be declared" for "denuclearization." Given that North Korea must be aware that the withdrawal of all US tactical nuclear weapons from Korea was completed in the 1990s, the only logical reason for North Korea's deliberate claim is to delegitimize USFK bases in general by broadly defining them as potential facilities for nuclear weapons.

Regardless of whether it is realistic to establish the NWFZ, North Korea's proposal for such a zone can itself encourage the idea that the USFK's presence is an illegal measure to prevent denuclearization. If this belief becomes prevalent, it can make reinforcing US-ROK military cooperation difficult. The deterrent effect that North Korea's "denuclearization" exercises on the future development of the US-ROK alliance overlaps with the "three no-policies" China imposed on South Korea in October 2017, namely that the ROK would not join the US missile defense system, or develop the US-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation into a military alliance, or make an additional deployment of the terminal high altitude area defense (THAAD) system.

Exploiting China's Fear of Exclusion: North Korea's Entrapment Tactics

With respect to the THAAD system operated by the USFK, China expressed a notion that aligns with North Korea's delegitimization of the US-ROK alliance. Like North Korea, which has insisted that

the USFK withdraw with a peace treaty to replace the armistice, China's Vice Foreign Minister advocated for a similar substitution, which he wished to take effect even before the completion of North Korea's denuclearization, claiming, on July 9, 2016, that "the relevant bilateral military alliances are a product of a bygone era." The PRC's Foreign Ministry has reinforced this assertion, which could oppose the USFK's presence, as taking a "parallel-track approach" to advancing denuclearization and replacing the armistice in response to the nuclear crisis of the time.

North Korea will assume the shared objective with the USFK in its strategy to let China provide more assistance for it. North Korea roused China's fear of being excluded from a potential peace accord, which could restrict US presence in the future. Following this strategic move, China's position on the DPRK's "denuclearization" gradually shifted towards having "[spoken] highly of the DPRK side's efforts," at the time of President Xi's visit. The previous stance expressed by President Xi when he met with Chairman Kim, who travelled to China in March 2018, was neutral; he said, "China sticks to the goal of denuclearization of the Peninsula."³ President Xi did not specifically support "denuclearization" as defined by North Korea. It was shortly after this neutral statement by President Xi that Kim Jong-Un advocated for US-ROK-DPRK trilateral talks aimed at reaching a peace accord with respect to the Korean War during proceedings through the Panmunjom Declaration with South Korea. This was done without China, despite its status as a major party in the war.

Following the Declaration, Kim Jong-Un visited President Xi again, and this time, he benefitted from Xi's more sympathetic stance; the president said, "China supports the DPRK's adherence to the denuclearization of the peninsula."⁴ Still, at the

time of this statement, it was unclear to which version of denuclearization—the NPT's or the DPRK's—the Chinese president meant for North Korea to adhere. Subsequently, North Korea opted to exclude China from peace accord talks. At the Foreign Ministers' meeting, which took place five days prior to the two top leaders' own meeting, only the Chinese side reported North Korea's desire to "maintain close communication with China on realizing the denuclearization and establishing peaceful mechanisms on the Korean Peninsula," according to the PRC's Foreign Ministry.⁵ The Korean News Agency (KCNA), North Korea's state-run news agency, did not report these remarks in North Korea.⁶

In contrast to the previous attitudes, North Korea allowed PRC President Xi to publish a statement expressing his hope to work with the "Korean side and the related parties" via diplomatic talks and negotiations regarding "Korean issues," in the WPK CC's official newspaper, *Rodong Shinmun*, a day ahead of the President's June 2019 visit. This strongly suggests that, for Chairman Kim Jong-Un, the PRC leader's soon-to-be released statement in which he speaks "highly of the DPRK side's efforts" was representative of China's significant shift toward aligning with North Korea's "denuclearization" ideology. The prospect of these diplomatic talks was first published in North Korea in reference to the series of Xi-Kim summits that began in March 2018, even though the "Korean issues" mentioned are not exactly the same as the "peaceful mechanism." President Xi's comment in *Rodong Sinmun* hinted at the likelihood of four-party talks that would include China; this was a marked shift away from the three-party talks for which Chairman Kim advocated while signing the Panmunjom Declaration. Kim Jong-Un probably acknowledged that Xi Jinping's expression of his

willingness to align with North Korea, to some extent, met Kim's demand. Only after this concession did the North Korean leader allow the President to publish his statement revealing strong prospects for four-party talks about "Korean issues" in the official newspaper.

China's position of having "[spoken] highly of the DPRK side's efforts" to "promote the denuclearization of the Peninsula" represented the achievement of an important political goal for Kim Jong-Un. Even considering Xi Jinping's praise during Kim Jong-Un's third visit to China in June 2018—"Comrade Chairman has made positive efforts for realizing denuclearization"⁷—North Korean media elected not to report their Chairman's remarks, which were printed in a Chinese release, stating that "the DPRK side hopes to work with China and other concerned parties to promote the establishment of a lasting and solid peace mechanism on the Korean Peninsula."⁸ Given that President Xi highlighted Chairman Kim's "positive efforts" after praising the 2018 US-DPRK Singapore summit just before Kim's visit to China, Xi's support, at that time, was likely limited to a general commendation of North Korea's "efforts" to reach an agreement with the US. In January 2019, when Kim Jong-Un last visited President Xi prior to the latter's journey to North Korea, Xi "spoke highly of the positive measures taken by the DPRK side [for promoting] the realization of denuclearization on the peninsula."⁹ Although the sentiment of this statement was almost the same as President Xi's position at Pyongyang the following June, Kim Jong-Un still had yet to acknowledge the prospect of four-party talks via official media publication within North Korea. This is because Xi Jinping's comment addressed concrete "measures" already taken by the DPRK instead of the overarching ideology of "denuclearization," under which North Korea would keep its nukes until "worldwide

disarmament.” Only after President Xi “spoke highly of the DPRK side’s efforts,” conveying his meaning as clearly in opposition to the NPT’s and US’s stances on the issue, did Kim Jong-Un allow Xi to circulate a statement among the people of North Korea informing them that the president indeed wished for North Korea to engage with China in four-party talks.

Conclusion

Xi Jinping’s visit to North Korea in June 2019 occurred at a time when Chairman Kim was attempting to compel the US to accept the DPRK’s concept of “denuclearization.” Following Chairman Kim’s remark that he “will keep the patience until the end of the year,” at which time he would assess the US’s attitude during denuclearization talks in April at the Supreme People’s Assembly, North Korea displayed its ability to reintroduce a state of nuclear-

missile crisis by launching two short-range missiles into the Sea of Japan in May. Immediately after President Xi returned home in June, Chairman Kim publicized his receipt of a letter from US President Donald Trump that he described as giving him a feeling of “satisfaction.” This was another North Korean message to China, demanding that the latter show its unequivocal support for North Korea’s concept of “denuclearization,” in light of shared security objectives regarding the US. Still, the fact that North Korea’s public stance continues to fall short of directly promising that the four-party talks slated to discuss replacing the armistice with a peace treaty will include China likely indicates that Chairman Kim will maintain his entrapment strategy aimed at eliciting a stronger alignment between the PRC and the DPRK in favor of North Korea.

¹ National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review 2019*, (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies), 78-80.

² “Panmunjom Declaration on Peace, Prosperity and Reunification of Korean Peninsula,” *Korea Central News Agency*, April 28, 2018.

³ “Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un hold talks in Beijing (2),” *Xinhua*, March 28, 2018; “(Waishi) Xi Jinping tong Jin Zhengen Juxing Huitan (Foreign Affairs: Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un hold talks),” *Xinhua*, March 28, 2018.

⁴ “Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un hold talks in Dalian (2),” *Xinhua*, May 8, 2018; “Xi Jinping tong Chaoxian Laodongdang Weiyuanzhang Jin Zhengen zai Dalian Juxing Huiwu (Xi Jinping hold talks with Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the Workers’ Party of Korea, in Dalian),” *Xinhua*, May 8, 2018.

⁵ People’s Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Wang Yi Holds Talks with Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho of the DPRK,” May 2, 2018; People’s Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Wang Yi tong Chaoxian Waixiang Li Yong Hao Juxing Huitan (Wang Yi Holds Talks with Foreign Minister Ri

Yong-ho of the DPRK),” May 2, 2018.

⁶ “Ri Yong-Ho Uemusang Gwa Chungkook Kookmu Uiwon kyomu Uemubuzang sai e Hwedamu (Foreign Minister Ri Yong-Ho of DPRK held talks with Chinese state councilor and Foreign Minister),” *Korea Central News Agency*, May 3, 2018.

⁷ “1st LD-Writethru-China Focus: Xi Jinping , Kim Jong Un hold talks in Beijing,” *Xinhua*, June 19; “Xi Jinping tong Chaoxian Laodongdang Weiyuanzhang Jin Zhengen Juxing Huitan (Xi Jinping hold talks with Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the Workers’ Party of Korea),” *Xinhua*, June 19.

⁸ *Xinhua*, June 19.

⁹ People’s Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Xinhua Headlines: Xi, Kim hold talks, reaching important consensus,” January 10, 2019; People’s Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Xi Jinping tong Chaoxian Laodongdang Weiyuanzhang Jin Zhengen Juxing Huitan (Xi Jinping hold talks with Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the Workers’ Party of Korea),” January 10, 2019.

Profile

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