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North Korea is showing signs of breaking away from its isolationism. Faced with a string of problems, including the “No Deal” Hanoi Summit and a series of failed working-level negotiations on its nuclear weapons in 2019, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, North Korea declared a strategy of self-reliance and head-on breakthrough, thus pursuing an isolationist policy for about two years. Although North Korea-China relations enjoyed the best honeymoon period since the end of the Cold War, it was difficult for China to provide aid to North Korea, which would blatantly undermine sanction efforts. Moreover, the border blockade following the pandemic served as a physical barrier in providing aid to North Korea. During this period, North Korea implemented a tight border blockade as its strict quarantine measure, meanwhile, promoting economic restructuring, such as the abolition of the “privileged economy,” showing that it was devoted to resolving internal problems.

It was at the end of September 2021 that North Korea changed its policy direction. On September 21, when President Moon Jae-in again proposed an end-of-war declaration in his speech at the 76th UN General

Assembly, Kim Yo-jong, Vice Department Director of Workers' Party of Korea, said, "the end-of-war declaration is an interesting and good idea" (remarked on September 24), adding that if conditions such as mutual respect, guarantee of fairness, and the withdrawal of hostile policy toward North Korea are met, then "not only the end-of-war declaration, but also the resumption of the inter-Korean joint liaison office and the inter-Korean summit can be resolved" (September 25).

Chairman Kim Jong-un presented a more progressive position in his policy address on October 2. First, it is worth noting that this speech contained no criticism of the "privileged economy." Considering that the privileged economy, with involvement from the party and the military, plays a key role in leading North Korea's foreign trade, Chairman Kim Jong-un's lack of criticism toward the privileged economy in his keynote speech is likely tied to the resumption of foreign economic relations. Second, it is noteworthy that not only was the issue of quarantine given a lower priority, but also the emphasis was placed on "lifestyle quarantine." The focus was on "making the business of keeping quarantine regulations and order as part of the public's own lifestyle." This can also be interpreted as measures in consideration of easing border blockades and resuming trade. Third, in relation to external and inter-Korean relations, although North Korea put forward the withdrawal of double-standards, unfair attitudes, and hostile policies as preconditions, it opened the possibility

of accepting the end-of-war declaration and ordered the restoration of inter-Korean communication lines. This is a “conditional” acceptance of the end-of-war declaration.

Chairman Kim Jong-un’s speech can be interpreted as a signal that North Korea will break away from its isolationist policy and actively resume its external activities. In particular, considering that the end-of-war declaration proposed by President Moon Jae-in is either “a trilateral South Korea-North Korea-US or a quadrilateral South Korea-North Korea-US-China” declaration, hence, a model that implies the possible exclusion of China, North Korea is showing a positive response, albeit with conditions. This can be interpreted as its intentions to break away from its traditional leaning toward China and promote a kind of “equidistant diplomacy” between South Korea, the US, and China. Since the end of the Cold War, North Korea has consistently insisted on the exclusion of China from the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. However, through the New Year’s address in 2019, North Korea had, for the first time, accepted the Chinese participation model by proposing the establishment of a peace regime with “parties involved in the Korean Armistice Agreement” as participants. Therefore, the conditional acceptance of this three-party or four-party end-of-war declaration can be seen as a hint that North Korea may return to its past model of excluding China. In response to President Moon’s proposal, Zhao Lijian, spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, brought up again the

argument for “parties of the Korean Armistice Agreement,” which suggests that whether an end-of-war declaration or a peace treaty is made, China will seek to be involved as a participating party. In other words, China has put the brakes on North Korea’s message that it may reenact an “equidistant diplomacy” between South Korea, the US, and China.

North Korea’s resumption of external activities and, in particular, a reserved response to the end-of-war declaration with the South Korea-North Korea-US cooperation model in mind, can be seen as a positive signal for the future restoration of inter-Korean relations. North Korea continues to launch missiles while simultaneously signaling its message of restoring foreign relations, but such acts can be judged as its intentions to maximize profits by playing a tug of war between South Korea, the US and China, rather than trying to play a new game through “strategic provocations” as in the past. Since the 2010s, with the certainty of a “rising of China,” North Korea carried out “strategic provocations” only when it was confident that China could back them up. Behind this was China’s engagement-oriented policy with North Korea, which was adopted shortly after the second nuclear test in 2009. However, the current strategic competition between the US and China is intensifying, but in the form of “China bashing” from the US rather than as a competition for hegemony. Under such circumstances, if North Korea carries out a strategic provocation that crosses the red line, it will be difficult for China to cover

North Korea any longer. North Korea must be well aware of this fact. Therefore, for the time being, it is unlikely that North Korea will carry out such “strategic provocations.”

Then, the decisive key to resolving the future of the Korean Peninsula is held by the United States. The North Korean nuclear issue is not a low priority to the Biden administration. Moreover, the Biden administration does not appear to be intentionally pursuing the “strategic patience” initiated by the Obama administration. This is because the North Korean nuclear threat has turned from a potential threat to a real threat. Regarding this issue, the Biden administration compromised the Trump administration’s “comprehensive agreement, step-by-step implementation” approach with North Korea’s “step-by-step agreement, step-by-step implementation” approach to focus on achieving a pragmatic “phased approach.” In reality, the Biden administration’s approach to North Korea has largely been unsuccessful as North Korea has continued to ignore US calls for negotiations while pursuing isolationism. However, with North Korea showing signs of breaking away from this isolationism, it is highly likely for them to respond to future US messages. Its response to the proposal for an end-of-war declaration may be the starting point.

At this current stage, the South Korean government should focus on restoring inter-Korean relations. In pursuing this, it is important to persuade the US and

strengthen South Korea-US cooperation in areas where the US can take proper action, such as humanitarian aid to North Korea or in the end-of-war declaration. Regarding the case of humanitarian aid to North Korea, it is desirable to promote it as a multilateral framework in which South Korea, the US, and China all participate, rather than as unilateral assistance from South Korea. Doing this would make North Korea highly likely to accept it, and potentially contain China's monopoly on North Korean influence. If necessary, one approach that may be considered is first restoring inter-Korean relations by sending a special envoy to North Korea, then facilitating the United States' participation. However, the issue of easing sanctions against North Korea needs to be approached with caution. Even if the Biden administration is assumed to likely pursue a pragmatic approach to sanctions against North Korea, it remains unclear whether such measures will overcome opposition from US Congress or bureaucracy. In such circumstance, if South Korea takes the first step to fuel the debate on sanctions relief, it could lead to backlash from the United States. There is also the risk of inducing excessive expectations to North Korea. Therefore, the best course of action is to approach the issue of sanctions relief carefully, keeping pace with the situation inside the United States.

Keywords: easing of border blockades, end-of-war declaration, phased approach, trilateral cooperation model