



Online Series

2017. 12. 15. | CO 17-32

What Does North Korea Want to Achieve through the Dialogue with the UN?

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The UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, returned to New York after his five-day visit to North Korea from December 5th to 9th. After his trip to North Korea, during which a meeting with North Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs took place, the UN released a statement that the UN delegates and North Korean counterpart agreed on the severity of security situation and the urgent need to establish peace on the Korean Peninsula. Feltman briefed the UN Security Council on the results of his trip that he had over 15 hour-long discussion with North Korean officials and will continue a dialogue between the UN and the DPRK.

It is notable that North Korea went a step further saying that it agreed to have a regular dialogue at different levels through mutual visits. North Korea precisely used the term 'different levels' implying that communications with the UN can be multi-dimensional, encompassing high-level and working-level meetings.

In fact, there have been some unusual aspects in North Korean official position given that the UN Under-Secretary-General's visit to North Korea had taken place for as long as five days and that North Korea suggested more progressive stance than what was initially expected. First, North Korea has been consistently criticizing the UN Security Council's resolution of sanctions against its missile provocations. However, it is worth paying attention that this time there was no mentioning of such accusation in North Korea's official briefing on an outcome of the visit. Ever since the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted a series of resolutions to sanction North Korea followed by its fourth nuclear test last year, Pyongyang has consistently argued through a statement of spokesperson of Korean Jurists Committee that a legal forum, including the international community and legal organizations, should be established to openly discuss the legal basis of UN sanctions. In September, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho bashed the UN when delivering the General Assembly address that it has unleashed a series of resolutions that turn justice into injustice compelled by the powerful US. However, after Feltman's visit, North's official briefing simply reiterated its principle stance merely citing an issue of fairness on UN sanctions.

Attention has also been paid to what kind of role the US had played in the process of Feltman's visit to North Korea. It was November 30th, one day after the launch of the Hwaseong-15 that the North allowed Feltman's visit to North Korea. It was, however, at the end of September, during which the UN General Assembly was held that the North expressed its intention to invite the UN Under-Secretary-General. Kyodo News Agency reported that Ri Yong-ho, who was at the General Assembly at that time, requested the opening of dialogue channel in a closed meeting with Guterres but that request was turned down due to US opposition. Currently, the US is keeping a distance from Feltman's visit to North saying that it has not delivered any message via his visit. Nevertheless, the fact that the UN high-ranking official's visit to North Korea coincided with an announcement of Secretary of State Tillerson of seeking unconditional dialogue with North Korea shows that at least the US Secretary of State and the UN, through

their own channel, have been adjusting terms of resumption of dialogue with the North.

More notably, why North Korea is sending a message of returning to dialogue through the UN should be carefully examined. The intention behind North Korea's invitation of the UN Under-Secretary-General to Pyongyang can be analyzed in the following four ways. First, North Korea could be trying to create a buffer zone through the UN to prevent the US from increasing military threats. This is also relevant with Antonio Guterres's emphasis on UN's moral responsibility and rights to secure peace ever since he got elected. Regarding the North Korean issue, it will be worth reviewing Guterres's interview with CNN on November 11th. He affirmed that unlike the Trump administration, which emphasizes the resolution of North Korea's nuclear program through China, China does not have a control over North Korea. And he stressed that it is important for the UN member states to voice the same opinion over sanctions against North Korea, and that it is equally important to have diplomatic solutions and dialogue in place in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue. North Korea, which has been seeking an exit from the US military threat, must have thought that using Guterres's stance and restoring a relationship with the UN would be a good opportunity to alleviate tensions.

Second, the North may have sought to use the UN channel as a means of circumventing a pressure from Beijing and Moscow since Pyongyang is under the pressure to suspend nuclear and missile provocations and return to dialogue. Last month, North Korea invited members of Russian Parliament and expressed its intention for dialogue with the US while asserting its status as a nuclear state. Feltman, during his stay in North Korea, also met with the Russian Ambassador to North Korea Alexander Matsegora. In fact, Moscow has recently been emerging as a main player by suggesting a step-by-step solution to the North Korean nuclear issue. Although China lost face due to its failure of having a meeting with Kim Jong-un during special envoy Song Tao's visit to North Korea, it nonetheless seems to be welcoming Russia's growing influence on North Korea, at least on the outside. Chinese state media Huanqiu Daily clearly stated its stance of welcoming North Korea

and Russia's contact and emphasized the importance of cooperation between China and Russia on resolving North Korean nuclear issue. North Korea, in preparation for the resumption of US-North Korea dialogue, may have wanted to send a signal to Russia and China who are more likely to side with the North that it is not simply demonstrating reckless behaviors.

Third, the UN can play a very effective role in delivering North Korea's message to the outside world when all the other communication channels are blocked in the face of UN-led international sanctions against the DPRK. Throughout the history of implementation of North Korea's external strategy, the North has been utilizing the UN as a means to achieve strategic goals when other bilateral or multilateral diplomatic channels were blocked. Pyongyang had used the UN as an arena for political confrontations against Seoul since the South and the North both joined the UN in 1991. Since the mid-1990s, it has mainly used the UN as a means to overcome serious food shortages. The North also showed a tendency to utilize the UN to improve its deteriorated international image ever since it was designated as a state sponsor of terror after the Korean Air airplane bombing incident in 1987.

Fourth, North Korea would probably attempt to highlight the fact once again that innocent citizens are suffering from economic hardships caused by UN sanctions. North Korea has already stressed through Sanction Damage Investigation Committee that sanctions of the US and its followers threaten the people's right to life and that the North faces a humanitarian crisis. In particular, North Korea mentioned the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) asserting that after implementation of sanctions, medicines and medical devices have not been properly supplied to UN Pyongyang Office. Currently, five UN agencies, including the UNICEF and the World Food Program (WFP), are stationed in North Korea. Through the Central Emergency Relief Fund (CERF), the UN has been steadily conducting activities to improve a nutritional status of North Koreans and enhance their ability to respond to diseases. In sum, in the midst of confrontational phase with the international community, a probable scenario is that North Korea is likely to use the UN to convert the 'sanction' frame into 'humanitarian



crisis' frame. The DPRK, leveraging such cooperative relationship with the UN, seems to have taken the first step toward a regular dialogue with the UN in order to seek an exit strategy from international sanctions regime. For the UN, the purpose of initiating a regular dialogue with the North might be to induce the North into returning to the negotiating table. ©KINU 2017

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