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North Korea's Fourth Nuclear Test: Implications and Impacts

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1. Introduction

On January 6, North Korea conducted the fourth nuclear test. On the day, at noon in Pyongyang Standard Time, the North Korean authorities announced, “the first h-bomb test was successfully conducted” on its state TV channel, Korea Central Television, and it especially emphasized the fact that this was according to First Secretary Kim Jong-un’s orders. North Korea’s fourth nuclear test de facto nullified the August 25 agreement and the inter-Korean relations will inevitably be strained. As the international sanctions on North Korea tighten, the confrontational frame of “hardline vs. hardline” between North Korea and the international community will speedily take shape.

2. Intentions of the Nuclear Test

North Korea’s this nuclear test is largely attributable to three factors.

First, it is likely that North Korea proceeded with the test as scheduled earlier in order to verify its nuclear capability in terms of technology accumulated after the third nuclear test in 2013. In other words, one could analyze that it is a natural procedure in the Kim Jong-un regime's process of consolidating its position as a nuclear weapons state. The regime has committed itself to enhancing its nuclear capability and to securing the position of nuclear weapons state: inscribed itself as a nuclear weapons state in the constitution in 2012; conducted the third nuclear test in 2013; expanded the existed "Strategic Rocket Command" to "Strategic Force" in 2014; and developed the submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) capability in 2015. Although Pyongyang and Washington reached the Leap Day agreement in 2012 — in the early days of the Kim Jong-un regime —, this was planned and pursued during the Kim Jong-il days. In fact, being a nuclear weapons state through strengthening nuclear capability has consistently been the Kim Jong-un regime's highest goal for the last four years. Hence, the regime conducted the third nuclear test with highly enriched uranium (HEU) already and afterwards, set the goal of obtaining h-bomb production technology at the final stage in its enhancement of nuclear capabilities. The recent test is believed to be conducted following the technological conclusion that the country has already reached an early technological stage related to fusion of thermonuclear weapon.

Second, the test has been done to fortify the power base and cement internal solidarity before the seventh Party Congress to be held in May 2016. As the North Korean economy began to stall recently, it seems that the North Korean regime turned to flaunt the outcomes in the nuclear sector among the achievements of the *byungjin* line (simultaneous development of the economy and nuclear capability). The regime should also have made the strategic judgment that it could blame the U.S. and the international community for the sufferings from sanctions caused by the nuclear test, thus, manipulating to create unity within the domestic society.

Third, North Korea would have desired to forcefully demonstrate the strategic value of its nuclear capability to the U.S. North Korea has demanded that the U.S. should suspend joint military exercises and sign a peace pact. However, the White House refuses these and firmly maintains the stance of strategic patience. In this situation, North Korea would have hoped to change the U.S. strategic interest by means of a progressed nuclear test. This is the reason why North Korea dubbed this nuclear test as a hydrogen bomb test and as a success.

3. Strategic Implications and Impact

Analyzing the following six different aspects provides the strategic implications and major impacts of the fourth nuclear test.

Progress in Nuclear Enhancement and Increase in Nuclear Threat

If the test is confirmed as a so-called “boosted fission weapon” test, which partially employed the h-bomb production technology as the North Korean authorities insist, this signals that North Korea’s nuclear capabilities have advanced in terms of miniaturizing, diversifying, and lightening the nuclear weapons and that the nuclear threat against South Korea and the U.S. has increased. Generally, a boosted fission weapon has two to five times greater magnitude than an atomic bomb. It is easier to make it lighter and smaller in the weaponization process. Accordingly, North Korea could effectively threaten U.S. naval bases in Japan with the 1,300km-range Rodong missile and U.S. bases in Guam with 4,000km-range Musudan missiles currently. Particularly, unlike Taepodong missile, an ICBM, Rodong and Musudan missiles could be delivered using mobile launchers, increasing the level of threat as this encumbers the detection of missiles prior to its launch. The enhancement of nuclear capabilities also increasingly poses a security threat to South Korea in the short-to-medium term. By being able to make it lighter and smaller, North Korea

could deliver the nuclear weapons through the currently plentiful Scud and Rodong missiles that reach from 300km to 1,300km currently. North Korea already has test-fired short-range missiles for more than twenty times from 2014 to the first half of 2015 and it is understood to have the technical ability to lighten the nuclear warhead to less than 1,000kg.

Reinforcing Efforts to Raise the Effectiveness of International Sanctions on North Korea

Caused by the fourth nuclear test, the international community will seek to raise the level of international pressure on North Korea and its effectiveness. It seems certain that the UN sanctions on North Korea for its provocations will toughen. China and Russia are also estimated to actively take part in it. Apart from the international sanctions, it is likely that the U.S., Japan, and maybe China will buttress their own unilateral sanctions on North Korea. Washington is speeding up to legitimize secondary boycott and has the possibility of re-designating North Korea as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. Tokyo will reinstate the sanctions that it lifted last year regarding trade restrictions and allowing port entry of North Korean ships. As well as cooperating with the execution of UN economic sanctions, Beijing might pressurize North Korea not in the form of sanctions. It is likely that it tightens either the visa requirement for North Korean workers or the monitoring of contraband trade in the border region such as Hyesan and Dandong.

These efforts to ratchet up international sanctions are basically intended to urge North Korea to re-enter the path of denuclearization. Hitherto, these attempts have failed to do so. The forthcoming sanctions after the fourth nuclear test may also go astray in meeting the goal. Nevertheless, major states will search for approaches to inflict hardship on the North Korean regime, reflecting on the past failures.

Heightening Tension between North Korea and International Community

The prospect for North Korea freezing nuclear activities and denuclearizing is bleak for some time. Pyongyang's steadfast resolve for nuclear possession and the regime's disinterest in denuclearization talks count as major reasons behind this prospect. The North Korean authorities recently expressed a strong demand for a DPRK-U.S. peace pact. However, this proposal indicates to discuss peace pact "at the level of a nuclear weapons state." This is different from the strategic purpose of avoiding the sanctions regime through denuclearization negotiations in the Kim Jong-il era. That is, the North Korean regime does not pursue the peace pact as a result of the denuclearization process. Thus, the Kim Jong-un regime's offer of a peace pact is merely a tactic to lay the responsibility on the U.S. considering North Korea's international standing and to buy time for enhancing nuclear capabilities. Another significant reason for the low possibility is the expected increase in the cost to induce suspension in nuclear activities and denuclearization. North Korea will charge much higher compensation for freezing nuclear activities and entering the path of denuclearization based on h-bomb technology. This entails that North Korea's negotiation leverage has added weight. In the process, North Korea is predicted to carry out diplomacy independently based on the confidence backed by the h-bomb technology. Consequently, it is highly likely to resist China, which has also called for North Korea's denuclearization, and China's influence on North Korea is likely to have relatively diminished. These circumstances imply that North Korea's deepening international isolation since 2013 and tension with the international community stabilized at a higher degree due to the fourth nuclear test will continue for a certain period of time.

North Korea's Nullification of August 25 Agreement and Increasing Inter-Korean Tensions

This provocation validates North Korea's lack of genuine will to improve inter-Korean relations. Hence, the inter-Korean relations will remain strained for

a considerable amount of time. The South Korean government has believed the August 25 agreement as a vital momentum in mending inter-Korean relations. Nonetheless, even though the North Korean regime has had sufficient understanding that the nuclear test will nullify the August 25 agreement, it did not refrain from doing so. It was able to foresee that South Korea would resume loudspeaker broadcasts by viewing the nuclear test as an “abnormal situation” in the August 25 agreement. This denotes that the North Korean regime prioritizes the enhancement of nuclear capabilities over the improvement in inter-Korean relations and regards the improvement in inter-Korean relations as of low strategic value for the time being. As the inter-Korean tensions are likely to aggravate at least until the 7th Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) in May, it is probably difficult to find momentum to improve inter-Korean relations. Tactically, North Korea may seek to shift things around roughly in May. Nonetheless, even if the inter-Korean contacts resume, it is hard to anticipate positive outcomes. Seoul cannot discuss what North Korea demands such as the resumption of Mt. Geumgang tourism and the termination of May 24 measures before the nuclear confrontation settles down. Moreover, one additional reason is that North Korea is highly likely to oppose any inter-Korean dialogue that includes the nuclear test as an agenda.

Mounting Possibility of North Korea’s Additional Provocation and Inter-Korean Military Tension

This nuclear test once again elucidated that the Kim Jong-un regime has shifted to an offensive strategy of boasting strategic values of the nuclear weapon. It will consider extra provocations to raise the credibility of its capabilities and determination. Specifically, the regime is highly likely to conduct another nuclear test using plutonium and highly enriched uranium to vaunt the explosive capacity, which fell short in this nuclear test, and it is also likely to test-fire long-range missiles and SLBM — those that the U.S. reacts most sensitive to. Since North Korea has continuously operated the 5MWe reactor for plutonium production in

Yongbyon since August 2013, the regime is always ready to increase plutonium stock through generating and reprocessing nuclear fuel rods. Furthermore, North Korea is liable to perform limited military provocations aimed at South Korea along with provocation targeting the U.S. Because South Korea resumed loudspeaker broadcasts from noon of January 8, North Korea is very likely to elevate the tensions by taking military countermeasures just as the situation prior to the August 25 agreement. Additional provocation is projected to occur between March when the details of international sanctions are decided and ROK-U.S. joint military drills take place and May when the 7th WPK Congress is held. This is because there are enough justifications for further provocations and it can be manipulated to bring the people together.

Strengthening ROK-U.S. Alliance and Increasing Expectations on China's Role

It is forecasted that there will be an increasing demand for substantial deterrence against the North Korean nuclear threat. In order to respond to North Korea's limited provocations replying to South Korea's resumption of loudspeaker broadcasts in the short run and to prepare the deterrence against North Korea's short and mid-range nuclear missiles in the mid-to-long run, Seoul has to depend more on U.S. extended deterrence capabilities. South Korea is largely unequipped for independent deterrence against North Korea and its effects are unreliable. As a result, it is probable to exert pressure on North Korea by mobilizing U.S. strategic assets early and in large-scale. Besides, there will be a heated debate on strengthening cooperation with the U.S. or bolstering independent nuclear deterrence against North Korean missiles. Meanwhile, because of this nuclear test, expectations on China's capability and strategic effectiveness regarding the North Korean nuclear issue will be rising. South Korea has laid efforts to boost ties with China even to the extent where the U.S. administration doubts South Korea as China-inclined so that it could ask China to take a stand in the North Korean nuclear

issue — South Korea's strategic demand and calculation. Because North Korea conducted the nuclear test irrespective of China's position, it is predicted that China could gravely contemplate on adopting a hardline policy on North Korea to protect its core values — international prestige and the stability of the Korean Peninsula.

4. Conclusion

Owing to North Korea's fourth nuclear test, inter-Korean relations, the climate surrounding the Korean Peninsula, and the security environment in Northeast Asia are presumed to tremble for the time being. Above all, this is because major powers' strategic interests, as well as South Korea's, have been seriously damaged due to the increase in nuclear threat. The international community including South Korea will immediately retaliate with stringent sanctions against North Korea. Pyongyang will resist with measures including further provocations. That is, for the time being, coercion on North Korea and North Korea's counter-coercion will repeat, raising instability and uncertainty on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. South Korea should view this reality coldheartedly, endeavoring to wholeheartedly prepare for the imminent threat. Firmly ensuring responsibility for the nuclear test, on the one hand, it should react with corresponding measures once North Korea takes additional provocations. Moreover, ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral security cooperation should be strengthened to effectively counteract against North Korean nuclear threat, and ROK-U.S.-China coordination should also be reinforced to deter North Korea's limited provocation and multiply the effects of forthcoming sanctions against North Korea. In this process, South Korea should drive the extensive cooperation of neighboring countries and the international community proactively and speedily.

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