



China-DPRK Relations and the U.S.-China Relations: A Review on “China Variable” in North Korean Affairs

Dr. LEE Seong-hyon

sunnybbsfs@gmail.com

Director of the Center for Chinese Studies, the Sejong Institute

English Abstract

In its pursuing the North Korean denuclearization, South Korea has always been conscious of China. In particular, South Korea has highly appraised China's influence on North Korea and tried to resolve the North Korean issue, betting on the Chinese influence. “The need of China to solve North Korea's nuclear issue” has been regarded as a model answer within the South Korean discourse, particularly pronounced under the Moon Jae-in administration. This paper explores an alternative answer. Oddly, Donald Trump was the starting point. Upon taking office in 2017, Trump said that he would make a deal with North Korea “with or without China.” Owing to his no prior diplomatic experience, Trump ignored the “diplomatic common sense” to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. In retrospect, the Singapore summit and the Hanoi summit marked the most historic moments in the U.S.-DPRK negotiation history, as they were the unprecedented occasions when the leaders of the two countries sat down across the table to solve problems, despite the fact that these summits were products of President Trump's prominent personality. After all, Kim Jong Un is the only person in North Korea who can make a decision on the North Korean nuclear issue. President Trump's face-to-face meeting with Chairman Kim was at least worth a try from a logic that focuses on problem-solving. The top-down process between the leaders, for it took place for the first time, clearly showed its limits. However, if South Korea remedies

the shortcomings, and if the U.S., its most important ally, crafts a finetuned approach to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, utilizing working-level talks with North Korea in the future, there is still room for driving at the resolutions. This paper, instead of returning to the past so-called “China role theory” (i.e., it takes China to resolve the North Korean issue) in the current deadlock, points out the “limitations” of China’s role, on the contrary, by closely scrutinizing China’s behaviors on North Korea during the process of denuclearization negotiation between the U.S. and North Korea under the Trump administration. ❖

※ Translator’s note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.

※ This article is written based on the author’s personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.