Geopolitics and A Realist Turn of US Foreign Policy Toward North Korea

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This paper examines the realist turn of US foreign policy under the Trump administration and how it will reshape the North Korean policies of the United States. As the US grand strategy under the Trump administration has shifted to decline denial under retrenchment, the dynamics of US-China relations of competition and cooperation will further intensify. While the priority of North Korean issues has been elevated with regard to US-China bilateral relations, it has become the issue of opposing interests, due to divergent expectations on the geostrategic landscape in the case of denuclearization on the peninsula. As President Trump’s willingness to resolve the North Korean issue becomes salient, the tension between the US and China is expected to be amplified and a more coercive approach toward denuclearizing the North is anticipated. Also, the Maximum Pressure and Engagement is likely to be adopted as a part of regional balancing strategy vis-à-vis the revisionist rising states in the region to build an architecture of peace through strength in Northeast Asia.

Key Words: North Korea, United States, Realism, Maximum Pressure and Engagement, Donald Trump, Unification

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I. Introduction

President Donald Trump, who demonstrated mixed attitudes toward North Korea during the 2016 presidential campaign, has recently presented his policy toward North Korea, labeled as “Maximum Pressure and Engagement.” This approach intends to place pressure on the North to denuclearize while engaging other countries, especially China, to join US efforts toward that objective. While engagement toward North Korea remains as an option, the ultimate end state of this policy is the North’s complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization (The White House, 2017), not an arms control or disarmament negotiation that might imply that the US concede to the North as a nuclear state.

While Trump’s approach has been portrayed differently from “Strategic Patience,” the policy proposed by the Obama administration, the resemblance of their key strategies has created skepticism over its effectiveness to denuclearize the North. Furthermore, this also illustrates the grim reality that the range of options available for the US to force North Korea to return to the six-party talk and honor its previous commitments is simply narrow, given that the US prioritizes diplomatic approach to denuclearize the North.

Nevertheless, a difference from Strategic Patience would be the pressure the US places on China to exercise more of its leverage as the North’s main energy provider and trade partner to rein in the regime. President Trump has consistently emphasized that China should solve the North Korea problem. While this does not imply that the US is likely to outsource the task of denuclearizing North Korea to China, the US has pressed China through shaming it as a currency manipulator, making arms deals with Taiwan, putting China on a global human trafficking list, accusing a Chinese bank of laundering money for the North, and implementing secondary boycotts. However, China has consistently argued that its limited influence upon the North is not enough to push Pyongyang away from nuclear weapons, which the North considers an indispensable means for the survival of its regime. Instead, China has proposed an alternative of the dual sus-