



North Korea's Post-Nuclear National Strategy and Inter-Korean Relations

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1. Introduction

Recently, North Korea has been warning of its intention to sever relations with the South. Using the leaflets distributed by North Korean refugee organizations across the border as a pretext, on June 16, North Korea blew up the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong, apparently as a partial measure to abandon North-South military cooperation. The statement released on June 4, 2020 by Kim Yo Jong, first deputy director of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), seemed to indicate that the North is doing this no matter what efforts or words the South puts forth.

Since the denuclearization discussions began between the North and the US and the North and South following the PyeongChang Olympics in 2018, the situation has taken a number of unpredictable turns. The North's current criticism of the South seems to be due to the stalemate between North Korea and the US which emerged following the US-DPRK summit in Hanoi, as well as the economic difficulties that the North has continued to suffer due to ongoing sanctions. The North's strategic actions indicate a need to re-evaluate the regime's post-nuclear strategy.

2. North Korea's Post-Nuclear Strategy Proposed at the 7th WPK Congress

During the 7th WPK Congress which was held for four days from May 6 to 9, 2016, a post-nuclear strategy for North Korea was proposed. North Korea has demonstrated rapid progress in its efforts to develop nuclear weapons following the promulgation of the Byungjin line policy to

simultaneously pursue economic and nuclear weapons development. On January 6, 2016, they tested a hydrogen bomb, and on February 7 of the same year they launched the Gwangmyeong 4 while also claiming to have succeeded in launching a satellite into orbit. After starting off 2016 in this way, the national strategy proposed by North Korea during the 7th WPK Congress was revealed as being based on the regime having already obtained nuclear weapons. Chairman Kim Jong Un emphasized that North Korea had now become one of the world's nuclear states in his Work Report speech given during the Congress.

As the domestic goal of the national strategy, Chairman Kim focused on developing technological productivity and normalizing the economy in order to legitimize the regime. This focus can be confirmed by the fact that the table of contents of the report on domestic policy began with a political legitimization strategy leading to the science and technology development strategy and economic development strategy. In the logical structure, the goal of building a strong socialist country linked the political necessity of legitimizing the regime to economic development policy. After defining the goal of building a strong socialist country as the basic task to legitimize his rule, Kim Jong Un emphasized the science and technology development policy as the policy area that must be prioritized in order to build a strong socialist country. He further stated that economic development was “the area where our party and government must concentrate their energy now.” The science and technology development strategy included a plan to develop cutting-edge technology, apply science and technology to the economy, and strengthen science education. It also had the goal of making North Korea a country that “develops its economy, military, and culture with science and technology.” The economic strategy announced during the Party Congress consisted of “the directives of Jucheization, modernization, scientification, and informatization of the people's economy” and a five-year strategy to improve the people's living standards. This strategy focuses on making North Korea an independent and technology-driven economy, and has the additional aim of improving the everyday lives of North Koreans. At the same time, Chairman Kim put forth policies to achieve the domestic task of civilizing the country. The goals set to accomplish this task consist of stimulating the development of the country's education, social welfare, physical education, and culture. Moreover, he emphasized in his speech that efforts to build a strong military and political nation must be consolidated in order to create a strong backbone for North Korea's domestic and diplomatic policies. While consolidating the socialist political system, he stated that the country would pursue policies to tighten the military's control of the country, strengthen their combat readiness, and develop the national defense industry.

In addition to these domestic strategies, at the 7th WPK Congress Chairman Kim also

discussed the regime's international strategy as well as its strategy towards South Korea, comprising the three revolutionary capabilities. First, the strategy towards the South aims for reunification through self-determination and consists of the four principles of national autonomy, national solidarity, securing peace on the Korean Peninsula, and the creation of a federal system. In order to achieve unification as an independent country, the first necessary step is to improve the fundamentals of inter-Korean relations. Kim Jong Un called for an end to psychological warfare and the spread of propaganda in order to achieve this goal. He also mentioned the necessity of the South recognizing North Korea's regime, for dialogue and the lessening of tensions between the two countries, and for basic respect for inter-Korean cooperation. Moreover, Kim Jong Un demanded that the US remove itself from the Korean Peninsula, put a stop to its sanctions against the regime, and stop provoking confrontation between the two Koreas in order to facilitate reunification. The noteworthy aspect of North Korea's strategy towards the South is its strong use of self-assertive language with regard to the principles of securing peace on the Korean Peninsula and creating a federal system against the backdrop of its nuclear weapons development. North Korea has demanded that the US recognize it as a nuclear state, draw up a peace treaty between the two countries, and remove its troops from South Korea. The regime has also referenced the possibility that it may pursue non-peaceful reunification if South Korea remains stubborn in its demand for unification through absorption.

Next, Chairman Kim presented the policy directions that must be pursued in order to achieve the strategic international diplomacy target of promoting global independence in the three diplomacy realms of self-determination (anti-imperialism), peace, and friendship. In the realm of self-determination diplomacy, the regime stated that they would seek an alliance of anti-imperialist powers, maintain their status as a nuclear state, and defend the WPK policy line. In the realm of peace, the North Korean military will emphasize nuclear deterrence on the basis of maintaining peace in the region and in the world as a responsible nuclear state, and positively aim towards the abolition of nuclear weapons. In the realm of friendship, North Korea will expand its friendly relations with the "progressive" countries of the world. It will also pursue the normalization of relations with countries it has considered hostile in the past as long as they respect North Korea's sovereignty and treat it amicably. The regime has said that its policy direction includes the diversification of diplomatic relations through exchanges and cooperation with capitalist countries. Through these particularities in its diplomatic policy, North Korea has demonstrated that it will also strengthen its self-assertiveness on the basis of its identity as a nuclear state.

3. Pushing North Korea's National Strategy Forward after Declaring the Completion of Nuclear Weapons Development

After the end of 2017, by which time North Korea had demonstrated its success in developing nuclear weapons through nuclear and missile tests, the regime indirectly announced that the necessary conditions for pushing forward with the new national strategy regarding inter-Korean relations and foreign relations had been met, and that the national strategy of the 7th WPK Congress would be fully implemented. First, the regime declared an internal focus on the domestic economy. At the Third Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee, Chairman Kim Jong Un proscribed that North Korea would now solidify the step of becoming a “nation with strong political ideology, and a nation with a strong military,” clarifying that the policy for all-out concentration on economic development meant that the entire WPK and the entire North Korean government should focus their efforts on building a socialist economy. During the 7th WPK Congress in 2016, he also stated that as North Korea had already become a nuclear state, “now is the time for our Party and our nation to focus our entire effort” on the economic line. In 2016, North Korea had already provided the logic behind choosing to concentrate on economic development after two years. However, while North Korea declared during the 7th WPK Congress that it had now become a nuclear state, in fact the regime needed to conduct a series of nuclear tests in order to prove its nuclear deterrence to both the domestic and international audiences. Accordingly, it was only after the regime declared in November 2017 that it had become a nuclear state that it could pursue the national strategy which was declared during the 7th WPK Congress. Of course, it is likely that with the opportunity presented by the inter-Korean dialogues and the US-DPRK contacts at the beginning of 2018, the regime had a chance to push ahead with a new national strategy.

At that time, North Korea pushed for policies in line with the national strategy it had put forth in 2016 regarding the South, including improving basic inter-Korean relations, concluding a peace treaty on the Peninsula, and dissolving sanctions. In order to realize the goal of fundamentally improving inter-Korean relations announced during the Party Congress, the Panmunjom Declaration was concluded on April 27, in which the two Koreas agreed to stop engaging in hostile actions. As another measure towards this goal, the Pyongyang Joint Declaration was signed on September 19, 2018 as a measure to reduce the risk of a military collision near the MDL or the NLL. Following the US-DPRK summit in Singapore, the eighth round of military talks was held between North and South Korean generals on June 14, 2018, and another three rounds were held including the talks on October 26, 2018. Moreover, an agreement was drawn up between North and South

Korea and the US and North Korea through the Singapore Summit and the Panmunjom Declaration to build permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula. Although President Trump said no, Chairman Kim Jong Un requested during the Hanoi summit between the US and North Korea that the UN sanctions be lifted for the sake of civilian economic activities.

Of particular note in the realm of international diplomacy is North Korea's nuclear test moratorium declaration as part of its national strategy of possessing nuclear weapons for peaceful purposes. This moratorium enabled the regime to conduct active friendship diplomacy in order to seek stronger amicable relations with the international community and a normalization of US-DPRK relations. On April 20, 2018, during the Third Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee, when it was declared that all effort would be concentrated on economic development, the regime announced that it was committing to a moratorium on nuclear and ICBM testing, that it would dismantle its nuclear testing grounds, that it would support an international nuclear test ban, and that it would commit to no first use of nuclear weapons and to non-proliferation. This announcement was in line with the policy direction of peace diplomacy put forth at the 7th WPK Congress. In other words, North Korea referred to its no first-use policy, its willingness to fulfill its non-proliferation obligations, and its eventual goal of denuclearization of the world during the 2016 WPK Congress. Moreover, the Singapore summit can be considered an effort to improve relations between North Korea and the US, which is in line with the "friendship diplomacy" policy direction of working to improve and normalize relations with countries that the DPRK has considered hostile.

4. North Korea's Tactical Retreat from its National Strategy and inter-Korean Relations

However, despite North Korea's active diplomacy in 2018, Chairman Kim was unable to succeed in creating a favorable environment for domestic policy due to the sanctions issue. When we say that North Korea set strategic goals in the domestic realm for regime survival, we can consider the North's peace diplomacy, improvements to inter-Korean relations, and friendly diplomacy toward the US to be aimed toward creating a favorable environment for domestic economic development. In contrast to this strategic intention, Chairman Kim's demand for a lifting of sanctions which he made during the Hanoi summit was rejected, and international sanctions on North Korea have shown no signs of weakening since then. Of course, following the no-deal Hanoi summit, North Korean held the Fourth and Fifth Plenary Sessions of the Seventh Central Committee, where the regime's policy of economic development via self-reliance under the ongoing sanctions began to take shape. At the Fourth Plenary Session, a demand to exhibit all of the nation's domestic

economic potential under a unified command of the Cabinet as a countermeasure to the continued sanctions was made. During the Fifth Plenary Session, the order was given to create measures for reorganizing the order and system of economic projects, including the unified command of the Cabinet, and a scientific manufacturing plan as well as to apply science and technology to the agricultural sector. However, substantive economic content appears to be absent from North Korea's countermeasures to the sanctions apart from the Cabinet command and the emphasis on economic management. This also means that of the various options in the five-year plan put forth during the 7th WPK Congress, these are the only available options left. Furthermore, as the sanctions drag on, the complaints of the people and the North Korean elite alike are increasing and Chairman Kim is becoming increasingly dependent on the political system of the Party and social control to maintain his regime.

Currently, North Korea appears to be working to escape the sanctions by withdrawing from all of the agreements and promises that were achieved in the international and inter-Korean spheres after 2018. The North appears to be withdrawing more rapidly from the commitments made to the South as compared to the agreements made with the international community. Previously, North Korea has played the "development of strategic weapons" card when denuclearization negotiations have reached a stalemate. During the Fifth Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee held in December 2019, Chairman Kim announced that he would continue to mobilize nuclear deterrence and develop new strategic weapons in the face of the nuclear threat and hostile actions of the US. This came up again during the fourth meeting of the Seventh Central Military Commission held on May 24, 2020. Next, the regime is tearing down the achievements that it pushed for initially in inter-Korean relations. On June 9, 2020, the North cut off communications between the leaders of North and South Korea as well as their governments and militaries, and on June 16 they blew up the inter-Korean liaison office. On June 17, North Korea's military general staff department announced that it was considering moving troops again to Mt. Kumgang and Kaesong, which were formerly sites of North-South economic cooperation. North Korea's declaration that the propaganda fliers sent from South Korea into the North were the reason it blew up the inter-Korean joint liaison office could be the application of the logic of the 7th WPK Congress. Kim Jong Un demanded that the fliers be stopped as a condition of improving inter-Korean relations at the Party Congress. It seems likely that North Korea is using this as part of its effort to achieve sanctions relief as a condition for South Korea to maintain any improvements in inter-Korean relations. North Korea cannot withstand continued sanctions by attempting to pursue only self-reliance measures, and so it is making unrelated demands of South Korea regarding inter-Korean relations.

Today, North Korea is taking tactical measures to retreat from its own national strategy in order to escape the unfavorable situation it is in, but it must seek new national strategies beyond these short-term tactics. North Korea has pursued a national strategy of focusing on economic development and improving inter-Korean relations and US-North Korea relations through peaceful nuclear policy since 2018, but has been threatening to reverse the compromise policy since the failed Hanoi summit. North Korea's recent criticism of South Korea seems to be more dramatic in its intention to curb internal dissatisfaction due to worsening economic conditions. North Korea will demand that South Korea represent the North's perspective rather than the US perspective when it comes to the sanctions issue. At the least, by doing so, North Korea can sow discord within the ROK-US alliance. However, this may be only a short-term solution. The further deterioration of inter-Korean relations will be a factor that prevents North Korea from focusing on economic development. This kind of negative impact is thought to be the reason Kim Jong Un decided to withhold military action against South Korea at the June 23 meeting. To fundamentally solve the Korean Peninsula problem, North Korea must find a new national strategy to solve the denuclearization problem. Previously, North Korea decided to pursue economic development in order to obtain the legitimacy of the regime, but today it is in a situation where it is necessary to worry about regime instability. Considering that North Korea intends to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the founding of the WPK in October of this year, it seems to want to hold the 8th Party Congress next year. If so, it is time for the international community to make joint intellectual efforts to enable North Korea to announce a new national strategy preparing for denuclearization at the next Party Congress.

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