



# **Restoration of the Communication Line and the ROK–U.S. Joint Military Exercise: Interpretation of North Korea's Tactics**

Won Gon Park (Ewha Womans University)

It has been confirmed that North Korea's recent acts toward South Korea, which began with the restoration of the communication hotline on July 27, are in fact "offensive." The two Koreas announced the reopening of the communications hotline on July 27 and simultaneously declared their intention to improve inter-Korean relations. In particular, it has been revealed that the leaders of the two Koreas have exchanged personal letters discussing the restoration of relations since April, which confirms that the decision was made by Chairman Kim Jong Un.

However, doubts have been raised instantly about North Korea's intentions as the announcement lacked explanations on how North Korea would handle the issue prior to the ROK-U.S joint military drills in August. Eventually, North Korea sent a message demanding the suspension of the joint exercise via a statement by Vice Department Director Kim Yo Jong of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea four days later, on August 1. When the U.S. and South Korea announced that a scaled-down version of the joint exercises would take place, this announcement was lambasted by Kim Yo Jong and Kim Yong Chol, the head of the United Front Department, on the August 10 and 11, respectively, that it was a "perfidious behavior" and claimed that "[the South] letting go the opportunity for improved inter-Korean relations." This paper attempts to analyze the intentions of North Korea's proposal to restore the communication hotline and its subsequent complaints regarding the joint military exercise.

## **North Korea's Policy toward South Korea**

When the restoration of the hotlines was announced on July 27, some interpreted that North Korea had shifted its policy toward South Korea to thaw chilled inter-Korean ties. They believed that the main reason for recent changes in North Korea's policy was that it needed South Korea's assistance to combat the following triple distresses: COVID-19, economic sanctions, and natural disasters. The economic difficulties facing North Korea were publicly acknowledged by Kim Jong Un himself at the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea in June, during which he said, "The people's food situation is now getting tense." Analysts also suggested that North Korea was

attempting to receive food aid and COVID-19 support by resuming inter-Korean dialogue, while sending a message to the Biden administration to lower the level of sanctions.

However, it is difficult to see any evidence that North Korea has changed its policy toward South Korea. As a state with one man rule, it is clear that the decision of the supreme leader takes precedence over everything but still aims to procure minimum procedural justification. As for its policy toward South Korea, North Korea decided to maintain its existing hardline approach toward South Korea at the 8th Party Congress in January of this year, after Kim Yo Jong defined referred to inter-Korean relations as "hostile" through a statement in June 2020. At the Party Congress, Kim Jong Un diagnosed the current state of inter-Korean relations through the following words: "It is no exaggeration to say that the current inter-Korean relations have been brought back to the time before the publication of the Panmunjom Declaration and the hope for national reunification has become more distant." Furthermore, as a condition for improving inter-Korean relations, he stated that "it is imperative for the U.S. to withdraw its aggression troops and war hardware deployed in South Korea," and declared that relations would be established depending "entirely [on] the attitude of the South Korean authorities." Since then, North Korea, which has been maintaining extreme lockdowns due to concerns regarding the spread of COVID-19, has unusually held large-scale conventions and meetings every month. However, there has been no "line struggle" to change its policy toward South Korea. Therefore, it is unreasonable to interpret the July 27 announcement as North Korea changing its course toward South Korea.

The argument that North Korea is trying to overcome economic difficulties through South Korea is also unconvincing. Since the 8th Party Congress, North Korea has raised two topics of "ideological struggle," through which it aims to defeat anti-socialism and non-socialism, and "self-reliance" at various conventions and meetings. At the 8th Party Congress, Kim Jong Un redefined the strategy of self-reliance as "a strategy for offensive for turning the mean sanctions by the hostile forces into a golden opportunity for strengthening our self-development capability and internal motive force and into a political line to be constantly adhered to in socialist construction." He also emphasized ideological struggle and called for thoroughly establishing the revolutionary discipline of intensifying criticism." North Korea's position reaffirmed "the revolutionary line on launching an offensive for making a breakthrough head-on as required by the present situation and the developing revolution (abbreviated as "breakthrough head-on line")," which was adopted at the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK held in December 2019. At that time, Kim Jong Un declared "a breakthrough head-on [to foil the enemies' sanctions and blockade] by dint of self-reliance" and said, "Let Us Break Through Head-on All the Barriers to Our Advance! This is the fighting slogan the entire Party and all the people should uphold today."

In addition, since North Korea enacted the "Law on Rejecting Reactionary Ideology and Culture (hereinafter 'Rejection Law')" in December 2020, Kim Jong Un has also called for "effecting a revolutionary change in the mental and moral life of the people by pushing ahead with the eradication of non-socialist, anti-socialist practices" at the 8th Party Congress. After that, the same statement was repeated at almost every meeting. For example, at the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee held in June, he emphasized that "the struggle against the anti-socialist and non-socialist practices is a do-or-die battle." Under the Rejection Law, distributing videos, photos, and books from South Korea, the United States, and Japan is punishable at highest by the death penalty, and using them leads to 15 years in prison. Additionally, it is forbidden to use South Korean-style accents or singing styles. At the Congress of the Socialist Patriotic Youth League, Kim Jong Un referred to "exotic hairstyle, attire, and speech as dangerous poisons."

In addition, Kim Jong Un said last year that he "would not receive external support," and at the 8th Party Congress in January, he downgraded South Korea's proposals for "cooperation in epidemic prevention and humanitarian field and individual tourism" as "inessential issues." Under these circumstances, it is difficult for North Korea to initiate economic cooperation with South Korea in earnest.

COVID-19 also prevents North Korea from resuming full-fledged economic activities with South Korea and the outside world. Since the declaration of the "National Emergency Quarantine System" on January 24 last year, North Korea has been thoroughly closing its borders, with no plans to open them until the end of August 2021. Currently, the newly appointed Chinese ambassador to North Korea and the replaced North Korean ambassador to China are not able to go to Pyongyang. At the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee in June, Kim Jong Un called for "the economic guidance organs to meticulously organize the economic work to cope with the unfavorable condition of the emergency anti-epidemic work" to prepare for the "prolonged struggle for keeping afloat the overall economy and for providing food, clothing and housing for the people." It is assessed that North Korea has been holding out as long as possible through self-reliance while still limiting itself from the outside world. According to the South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS), North Korea has taken measures for limited exchanges in some regions. At the expanded Politburo meeting held at the end of June, Kim Jong Un pointed out, "[senior officials in charge] caused a crucial case of creating a great crisis in ensuring the security of the state and safety of the people and entailed grave consequences." The NIS analyzed the grave incident as "a combination of insufficient preparation for operation of the disinfection facility for COVID-19 quarantine newly installed at the Uiju airport near Sinuiju, delayed delivery of wartime supplies, and poor management." Although there is a possibility that North Korea will pursue some limited exchanges, normal economic activities will only be possible after COVID-19 has been effectively overcome, so exchanges and cooperation with South Korea are inevitably limited.

Another piece of evidence that supports the above analysis is that North Korea did not inform its citizens of its intention to restore communication lines and improve inter-Korean relations on July 27. Afterward, statements lambasting the joint exercises made on the 10th and 11th were released through an internal North Korean media outlet. Since there was no change to the hardline route toward South Korea, the news on the policy shift was not released to North Koreans on the 27th.

### **North Korea's Intention**

If North Korea did not change its policy toward South Korea, its actions can be analyzed as having the following intentions. First, North Korea wants to decouple ROK – U.S. joint exercises. According to the National Intelligence Service, North Korea proposed to restore the communication line. The problem is that by the 27<sup>th</sup>, it was actually difficult to reschedule the joint exercise. From the end of July, U.S. agents participating in the training began to enter South Korea and in early August, the training goals and scenarios were confirmed through a "seminar" overseen by the United States Forces Korea (USFK) commander and the chairman of the Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff. From the 10th, the Crisis Management Staff Training (CMST), a pre-rehearsal, was scheduled to be held. The United States conducts joint trainings with allies all year round, and prepares for joint trainings for at least three months or six months to a year, considering the nature of the recruitment system. If the training is adjusted less than 15 days before the event, it becomes difficult to properly train recruits.

Second, North Korea wants to build up the reasoning for future provocation. North Korea would have known that South Korea and the U.S. would not cancel the joint exercise. North Korea's

pretext is that South Korea and the United States carried out the joint exercises, a symbol of hostile policy, although North Korea first proposed the restoration of communication lines in good faith. Therefore, all of North Korea's subsequent actions can be justified. The statements released on the 10th and 11th by Kim Yo Jong and Kim Yong Chol share a similar logical structure. Kim Yo Jong said that due to "the perfidious behavior of the south Korean authorities," "we will put more spur to further increasing the deterrent of absolute capacity ... i.e. the national defense capabilities and powerful preemptive strike for rapidly countering any military actions against us." Kim Yong Chol also blackmailed South Korea, saying, "we will make them realize by the minute what a dangerous choice they made and what a serious security crisis they will face because of their wrong choice." These statements build up the pretext that justifies their provocations.

The pretext that North Korea is building up is also directed toward China. Basically, China does not want tensions to escalate on the Korean Peninsula due to North Korea's provocations. In particular, as North Korea's continued missile launch tests can provide a rationale for the U.S. to build a missile (defense) system that can also keep China in check, China is not pleased with this situation. However, as the U.S.-China conflict intensifies, China has moved closer to North Korea. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also criticized the joint exercises, saying that the "upcoming exercise between South Korea and the U.S. is not 'constructive'" at the ASEAN Regional Forum on August 6 and that the UN Security Council should "invoke the rollback terms of the DPRK-related resolutions and ease sanctions against the DPRK." China is reinstating the freeze-for-freeze idea to suspend both the joint military drills and North Korea's missile and nuclear tests and a dual-track approach for promoting a peace process on the Korean peninsula including the easing of sanctions against North Korea. North Korea may argue by using the same logic that they took measures in good faith to improve relations with the South but as the joint exercises have been carried out despite China's opposition, provocations for self-defense are justifiable.

Third, North Korea may intend to maximize disagreement between South Korea and the U.S. The U.S. emphasizes the joint training. General Paul LaCamera, the commander of USFK who took office on July 2, expressed his displeasure at the request for suspension and said, that "they are extremely important to build readiness." This is also linked to the ongoing nuclear deal with Iran. Despite the promises made during his presidential campaign, President Biden has refused to restore the nuclear deal, forcing new demands on Iran. In such a situation, if the U.S. only appeases North Korea, it will have to bear difficulties pertaining to domestic politics.

Even if the joint exercise is canceled, there is no guarantee that North Korea will return to the negotiating table. Experts in Washington point out that "North Korea should stop engaging in dialogue on specific conditions." It is also burdensome for China to demand the suspension of the joint military drills amid escalating tensions between the U.S. and China. On the other hand, the South Korean government pushed for adjustment after Kim Yo Jong's statement on August 1, although the joint drills had actually started.

Lastly, North Korea wants to justify its nuclear development programs. Although the expression "nuclear" does not appear, Kim Yo Jong declared the importance and necessity of nuclear weapons in her statement on August 10, mentioning the legitimacy of increasing "national defense capability," "the force powerful enough to fully contain the external threats to us," and "the deterrent of absolute capacity," which North Korea uses when referring to nuclear weapons. Moreover, North Korea's request for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea is interpreted as a *de facto* refusal on negotiating about the denuclearization of North Korea. Kim Yo Jong said, "As long as the U.S. forces stay in (South) Korea, the root cause for the periodic aggravation of the situation on the Korean

Peninsula will never vanish." Even if denuclearization negotiations resume in the future, North Korea can use the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea its main condition. In such case, South Korea and the U.S. are unlikely to agree; North Korea could demand the maintenance of its nuclear capability and instead to switch to nuclear disarmament negotiations.

In conclusion, North Korea's move toward South Korea, which began with the restoration of hotlines, has been confirmed as an "offensive" measure. There is no indication that North Korea has changed its policy toward South Korea. Through such an offensive stance, North Korea succeeded in downsizing further the joint exercise, causing a discord between South Korea and the U.S., disagreement in South Korea, and building up its pretext.

The ROK-U.S. joint drills should be carried out as planned. If they are reduced at the last minute under pressure from North Korea, it will be difficult to make hold meaningful trainings. In addition, adjusting the joint exercises under a situation in which North Korea has not expressed any intention to return to dialogue for denuclearization is an act of reducing leverage for the future negotiation with the North. Above all, the ROK-U.S. joint exercise aims to maintain readiness against North Korea. As South Korea and the U.S. strengthen their readiness posture and minimize the effectiveness of North Korea's nuclear weapons, there will be a higher possibility for denuclearization in North Korea. As South Korea and the U.S. keep reducing North Korea's nuclear weapons' efficacy by strengthening its deterrence capability, North Korea would be more likely to choose denuclearization. ■

- **Won Gon Park** is Professor in the Department of North Korean Studies of Ewha Womans University. He received his Ph.D. from the Department of International Relations at Seoul National University. He studied the ROK-US alliance and North Korea for 18 years at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses. He served as a professor of international studies at Handong Global University. Currently, he is a member of the Policy Advisory Committee of the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His primary research areas include the ROK-U.S. alliance, North Korean diplomacy and military affairs, and international relations in Northeast Asia.

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Typeset by: Seung Yeon Lee

For inquiries:  
Seung Yeon Lee, Research Associate

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 205)                      slee@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute  
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,  
Seoul 04548, South Korea  
Phone 82 2 2277 1683    Fax 82 2 2277 1697  
Email eai@eai.or.kr    Website www.eai.or.kr