



# Kim Jong Un's 2019 New Year's Speech and the Task of Achieving Complete Denuclearization

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*Translated by Jinkyung Baek*

Unlike the past, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un gave his 2019 New Year's speech sitting comfortably on a sofa overlooked by a large portrait of his grandfather Kim Il Sung and his father Kim Jong Il. The New Year's Address defined 2018 as “a historic year, in which remarkable changes took place in the internal and external situations and our socialist construction entered a new stage thanks to our Party's line of independence and strategic decision.” On April 20, 2018, North Korea declared its victory in the simultaneous pursuit of strengthening the economy and its nuclear capabilities (the *Byungjin* line), and proposed a new strategic line focusing the country's efforts entirely on socialist economic construction. However, the 2019 New Year's Address clearly stated that this new strategic line will not pursue denuclearization and economic construction, but rather offer an important opportunity to continue to elevate the socialist revolution and speed up the advancement of socialism using the success of the *Byungjin* policy as a foundation.

North Korea proposed a new slogan for the coming year: “Let us open a new road of advance for socialist construction under the uplifted banner of self-reliance.” This slogan aims to achieve the “task of expanding the country's capability of independent development to open up bright prospects for taking a step forward towards socialist construction.” Accordingly, the regime emphasized that the strengthening of the self-reliant, socialist economy must be prioritized, the country's socialist political capacity must be enhanced, the nation must push ahead with the construction of a socialist civilization, national defense has to be bolstered, and lastly, revolutionary workers must continue to struggle. However, in order for the regime to effectively strengthen these capacities, it is essential to heighten its international capability to improve the North Korea-US relationship, and to increase the

capability of the two Koreas to further develop the inter-Korean relationship.

Kim Jong Un's assessment of the developing inter-Korean relationship was highly positive, as he stated "Last year was a stirring year which witnessed a dramatic change unprecedented in the history of national division spanning over 70 years." According to his speech, the three inter-Korean summits clearly show that inter-Korean relations have entered a new stage; furthermore, the Panmunjom Declaration, the September Pyongyang Joint Declaration, and the inter-Korean military agreement all represent a virtual nonaggression declaration and as such were important achievements. Kim also expressed his satisfaction with the first step towards active civilian inter-Korean exchanges of athletes and artists, as well as cooperation in various other fields including railway and road construction.

But it should be noted that North Korea is making two important demands with regard to the security guarantee of its regime and the lifting of sanctions. First of all, Kim said "Given that North and South committed themselves to advancing along the road of peace and prosperity, we maintain that the joint military exercises with foreign forces, which constitute the source of aggravating the situation on the Korean Peninsula, should no longer be permitted and the introduction of war equipment including strategic assets from outside should completely be suspended." He continued "It is also needed to actively promote multi-party negotiations for replacing the current ceasefire on the Korean Peninsula with a peace mechanism in close contact with the signatories to the armistice agreement so as to lay a lasting and substantial peace-keeping foundation."

Kim stated that he is willing to re-open Kaesong Industrial Park and allow tourism at Mt. Kumgang, and proclaimed that if South and North Korea present a united front, no external sanctions or pressure will be able to hinder the two Koreas in their efforts to forge a broad avenue to national prosperity.

However, if North Korea hopes to make these proposals the subject of full-fledged negotiations, the regime must demonstrate a true willingness to accept and implement the demands of the international community for complete denuclearization of North Korea. Furthermore, the reduction of military tensions in inter-Korean relations should be further implemented following the implementation of full-fledged operational and structural arms control, which is the next step after the initial stage of confidence building. At the same time, the Northeast Asian community must co-evolve its policy to facilitate this change.

This year's New Year's Address placed a greater weight than ever before on the importance of North Korea's relationship with the United States in strengthening the North's capability in the international realm. This is because an improved North Korea-US relationship is a key precondition

to bettering inter-Korean relations. First of all, Kim stated that the North Korea-US summit “brought about a dramatic turn in the bilateral relationship which was the most hostile on the earth and made a great contribution to ensuring peace and security of the Korean peninsula and the region...It is the invariable stand of our Party and the government of our Republic and my firm will to establish a new bilateral relationship that meets the demand of the new era as clarified in the June 12 DPRK-US Joint Statement, build a lasting and durable peace regime and advance towards complete denuclearization.”

However, in discussing North Korea’s efforts to denuclearize, he stated that “We declared at home and abroad that we would neither make and test nuclear weapons any longer nor use and proliferate them, and we have taken various practical measures.” This, however, referred only North Korea’s future denuclearization, and not to any efforts of the past.

North Korea’s concept of complete denuclearization was fully elaborated in the article published on December 20 of last year by the Chosun Central News Agency, titled “It Would be Better to Search for New Way Rather than Facing Barrier on Old Way” This article corrects the ‘false perception’ of the United States by offering a detailed rundown of the conceptual differences between ‘the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula’ and ‘denuclearization of North Korea.’ It emphasizes that “the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula means removing all elements of nuclear threats from the areas of both the north and south of Korea and also from surrounding areas from where the Korean peninsula is targeted.” The article suggests that in order to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, it is necessary ‘to completely remove the nuclear threats of the U.S. to the DPRK’ before the elimination of the nuclear deterrence of North Korea. At the same time, it asserts that North Korea agreed to the ‘denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,’ not ‘North Korean denuclearization’ during the Singapore summit. Unless a new strategic line has been adopted in the last ten days, the contents of this review accurately describe the North Korean understanding of ‘complete denuclearization,’ which is what Kim referenced during his New Year’s Address.

North Korea is currently pushing for three phases of negotiations at a summit with the United States in order to pursue its concept of denuclearization. In the first phase, North Korea proposed the voluntary destruction of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site and missile engine test site for a suspension of the joint ROK-US military exercises. In the second phase, North Korea will want to discuss the principle of “action for action.” This means North Korea will agree to part of what the US demands, a report and inspection of the Yongbyon nuclear facility, in exchange for an end to the US “hostile policy” against North Korea as a security guarantee for the regime and an easing of sanctions. In the third phase, North Korea will try to begin the negotiation of the North Korea’s version of “complete denuclearization in the frame of nuclear disarmament talks of Korean peninsula and surrounding

regions. However, North Korea's vision of a three-step negotiation strategy for the complete denuclearization of North Korea will be impossible to achieve. The United States and North Korea are currently engaged in a final tug-of-war for the second summit. In response to the US call for the reporting and international verification of all past, present and future nuclear facilities as a starting point from which North Korea should demonstrate its sincere willingness to pursue denuclearization, North Korea has countered with an offer to only partially report the past nuclear facilities of Yongbyon and accept IAEA inspections.

On the other hand, if North Korea does not accept this demand for complete denuclearization including the past, the United States is only willing to provide very limited guarantee for the North Korean regime and economic sanctions relief. Therefore, even if a second summit is held, neither the North nor the US will be satisfied that their counterparts are approaching the encounter with a true willingness to bargain, which in turn will make it difficult to set the stage for a third summit to achieve complete denuclearization.

Chairman Kim Jong Un said "I am ready to meet the US president again anytime, and will make efforts to obtain without fail results which can be welcomed by the international community," while at the same time stating that North Korea may be compelled to seek a new path if the US misjudges North Korea and continues with its tactics of sanctions and pressure. However, the US will not accept what North Korea is saying unless the gap between North Korea's concept of "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" and the US concept of "denuclearization of North Korea" can be closed.

Therefore, contrary to our expectations, the current effort to fully denuclearize North Korea will continue to face numerous challenges. The first step towards overcoming these difficulties is to shed subjective optimism and obtain a prudent grasp of the seriousness of the problem. Next, the US and the international community must cooperate with the clear understanding that the current measures of sanctions and deterrence cannot be eased as long as North Korea pushes for the "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." Furthermore, it should be signaled, if North Korea does pursue a new strategic line of "denuclearization of North Korea," our active engagement in ensuring the regime's desired security and easing of sanctions will be simultaneously implemented. Lastly, what is most important is that North Korea itself must undergo internal transformation to accept and acknowledge "denuclearization of North Korea" as its new path for the 21<sup>st</sup> century instead of the "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

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