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Intentions and Responses to Kim, Jong-un Regime's Shift in Its Policies toward South Korea and Unification

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Kim, Jong-un, through the conclusions of the 9th expanded meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, outlined a fundamental shift in its policy direction toward South Korea. Key aspects include the characteristics of the South Korean regime, the characteristics of inter-Korean relations, unification strategy, and restructuring of the organization responsible for its policies toward South Korea. Kim, Jong-un regime's policies toward South Korea and unification are quite different in that they characterize inter-Korean relations as those of two hostile nations, emphasizing the use of nuclear force for unification. This distinctive approach appears to stem from the pragmatic necessity to acknowledge the power disparity between South and North Korea, to admit defeat in the regime competition, and to recognize the realistic need to prevent South Korea from yielding influence.

Firstly, the unification strategy pointed out that federalist unification (one ethnic group, one state, two systems, two governments) is unrealistic, and instead proposes a unification theory by force that advocates using nuclear weapons to subjugate the territories of South Korea. North Korea's unification strategy has historically pursued two directions: one is unification by force, and the other involves establishing a pro-North regime through popular uprisings or electoral struggles resulting in a successful National Liberation People's Democratic Revolution led by an underground

organization in South Korea, ultimately merging South Korea under a North Korea-led federal system. However, Kim, Jong-un evaluates decades of efforts for a North Korean-led federalist unification as unsuccessful and declares unification using nuclear weapons to subjugate the territories of South Korea. Regarding North Korea's enemies and external affairs, instructions were made to "proactively prepare for supporting the powerful military actions of the army to subjugate the entire southern territories and expand preparations for assisting in the event of strong military actions by the military." In the future, regarding enemies and external affairs, there will be a significant expansion of activities related to supporting the Korean People's Army to prepare for unification by force, including extensive efforts in secret operations in South Korea and intelligence gathering.

Secondly, North Korea characterizes the nature of South Korea's system as a US colony. North Korea portrays South Korea as "peculiar people who are nothing more than the subordinate of US colonial rule" and as a "deformed body that is entirely dependent on the US for defense and security, having been thoroughly tainted by Yankee culture—a colony." Kim, Jong-un reiterates North Korea's perception of South Korea as a US colony. Emphasizing that South Korea is a US colony, Kim, Jong-un asserts that South Korea is not an equal dialogue partner for peaceful unification but rather a target for liberation that must be subdued through force.

Thirdly, the characteristics of inter-Korean relations are unequivocally defined as that of two hostile nations engaged in war. Kim, Jong-un declares that the relations between South and North Korea are "no longer those of kinship or similarity, but hostile relations between two nations at war, relations between two belligerent states." He diagnoses that a physical conflict can occur and escalate around the military demarcation line due to trivial, accidental factors. While denying the possibility of dialogue, exchange, and cooperation, Kim, Jong-un has effectively normalized the prospect of war on the Korean Peninsula. With Kim, Jong-un framing inter-Korean relations as those of hostile nations at war, there is an anticipation of heightened military provocations toward South Korea, contributing to increased military tension on the Korean Peninsula.

Fourthly, in response to the shift in the policies toward South Korea and unification, Kim, Jong-un has directed the reorganization and restructuring of organizations in charge of affairs related to South Korea including the United Front Department of

the Workers' Party of Korea, a department of the Central Committee of the party. He has instructed a change in the principles and directions of the struggle with South Korea. The reorganization and restructuring of organizations responsible for North Korea's policies toward South Korea, including the United Front Department of the Workers' Party of Korea, is expected to proceed in two main directions. Firstly, organizations related to inter-Korean economic cooperation and cooperative exchange will be significantly downsized or abolished. The organizations dealing with South Korea-related affairs, including the United Front Department of the Workers' Party of Korea, may maintain the organizational and personnel structures that expanded during the administrations of Kim, Dae-jung and Roh, Moo-hyun when inter-Korean exchanges and economic cooperation were active. However, in the current situation of severed inter-Korean relations, there may no longer be a need to maintain organizations under the United Front Department of the Workers' Party of Korea such as the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland, the Asia-Pacific Peace Committee, the National Economic Cooperation Federation, and the National Reconciliation Council. These organizations may either be downsized or abolished.

However, regarding enemies and external affairs responsible for conducting secret operations toward South Korea using military means is expected to be significantly strengthened. The secret operations division toward South Korea falls under the purview of the Reconnaissance General Bureau, established by integrating the General Staff Operations Bureau, Room 35, and the Ministry of the People's Armed Forces Intelligence Bureau in the early months of 2009. The tasks of this project include guiding and ensuring the safe penetration and return of agents dispatched to South Korea or abroad, as well as performing special missions such as transporting equipment for secret operations, carrying out abductions of important figures, and conducting acts of terrorism. Room 35 is responsible for tasks such as gathering information necessary for formulating North Korea's external strategies and strategies toward South Korea, securing the funds for governance through activities such as drug trafficking and counterfeit currency exchange, and performing special missions such as abductions and terrorism.

The role of the enemies and external affairs project is to support tasks such as gathering information necessary for the military actions of the Korean People's Army, aimed at subjugating the territories of South Korea, conducting secret operations

toward South Korea, and fostering social instability. The shift in principles of struggles and directions toward South Korea in this project involves formulating military strategies and operational plans to achieve the subjugation of the southern territories through nuclear force. It also includes making intense military provocations to contribute to heightened military tension on the Korean Peninsula.

What are the reasons behind the Kim, Jong-un regime's declaration of unification by force strategy toward South Korea, after 12 years in power and 5 years since the breakdown of the second US-North Korea summit? First, it is speculated that the Kim, Jong-un regime is employing a strategy to heighten military tension on the Korean Peninsula to gain approval as a nuclear state from the US. North Korea's strategy to acquire the status of a nuclear-armed state is executed over the long term without a specific deadline. North Korea's approach to obtaining the status of a nuclear-armed state is systematic. Initially, North Korea acts as a nuclear-armed state by mass-producing and deploying tactical and strategic nuclear weapons. Additionally, North Korea propagates the idea that it will never relinquish nuclear weapons under any circumstances. North Korea's refusal to abandon its nuclear weapons is reinforced through laws such as the Nuclear Weapons Possession Act, the Nuclear Weapons Policy Act, and the Constitution.

The final hurdle for North Korea to acquire the status of a nuclear-armed state lies in inducing the US to bring up discussions on nuclear disarmament or nuclear non-proliferation at the negotiation table. If the US raises discussions on nuclear disarmament or non-proliferation, it is seen as equivalent to granting approval for North Korea as a nuclear-armed state. However, a peaceful Korean peninsula cannot change the US' and South Korea's policy shift regarding North Korea's nuclear program. As North Korea escalates serious military tension and the possibility of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula to create uncertainty, the likelihood of South Korea and the US bringing up nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation discourse increases. North Korea has signaled its intention to define inter-Korean relations as those of hostile nations at war and escalate military tension on the Korean Peninsula to extract concessions from South Korea and the US on the North Korean nuclear issue.

Secondly, it appears that the Kim, Jong-un regime has defined inter-Korean relations as those of hostile nations at war to quell internal discontent regarding the nuclear

weapons development policy. North Korea has faced exacerbated food shortages and economic crises due to a combination of UN Security Council sanctions, COVID-19 border closures, and natural disasters. As food shortages and economic crises worsen, discontent among economic officials, trading companies and workers, market participants, and the general people grows regarding the nuclear weapons development policy. Defeatism and technical mysticism among economic workers that Kim, Jong-un pointed out implies their resistance to pursuing the nuclear weapons development policy. This is because defeatism and technical mysticism imply that economic development through self-reliance has limitations because of the sanctions imposed on North Korea. To address internal dissatisfaction regarding nuclear weapons development and as a means to consolidate support from the people and officials, the Kim, Jong-un regime has declared South Korea as a hostile nation at war, emphasizing the subjugation of territories through nuclear force.

Thirdly, it appears that the Kim, Jong-un regime has shifted its policies regarding South Korea and unification to completely eradicate admiration and emulation of South Korea by the North Korean residents. The spread of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) has influenced the mindset of officials and the general population of North Korea, leading to admiration and emulation of South Korea, and a dilution of the perception of South Korea as being an enemy. The widespread popularity of *Hallyu* is seen as a serious threat to the North Korean regime. In response, North Korea has enacted laws such as the Anti-Reactionary Thought Law, the Youth Education Guarantee Law, the Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Act, and the National Security Law to prevent the influx and spread of *Hallyu*. The Anti-Reactionary Thought Law stipulates “penalties, including indefinite forced labor or execution, for importing or distributing a significant amount of hostile foreign films, recordings, edited materials, or books, as well as organizing or inciting group viewings or readings.” It seems that the Kim, Jong-un regime has defined inter-Korean relations as those of hostile nations at war to eliminate admiration and emulation of South Korea among officials and the people, and to tightly control *Hallyu*, which is a risk factor to the regime.

The South Korean government must respond realistically to North Korea’s shift in its policies toward South Korea and unification. First, the South Korean government should formulate robust measures to effectively suppress North Korea’s nuclear

ambitions, including enhancing containment through the ROK-US Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), deploying US strategic assets on the Korean Peninsula, and establishing a Three Axis System. Additionally, contingency plans for responding to North Korea's potential military provocations for each scenario must be developed. If North Korea engages in military provocations, it is imperative to demonstrate that there will be zero tolerance by responding with overwhelming force. Furthermore, UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea should be strongly enforced. In particular, illegal funds through cyber hacking activities should be completely blocked.

Second, the South Korean government should actively promote the fundamental principle of a free and democratic unification policy to the North Korean regime, residents, and officials. It is crucial to convey the vision of viewing North Korean residents as part of a free and democratic unified nation, where they can enjoy freedom, human rights, and economic prosperity. Emphasizing the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue through dialogue and cooperation, and committing to substantial economic support for North Korea's modernization in the event of denuclearization, is essential. Additionally, to ensure North Korean residents' access to information, the South Korean government should expand activities that provide North Korea with information about the outside world. South Korea should create an environment where North Korean residents can receive South Korea's TV broadcasts and radio broadcasts in North Korea so that they can easily access *Hallyu*.

Third, the National Intelligence Service (NIS) and the police must significantly enhance their capabilities for communist espionage investigations. North Korea's enemies and external affairs project is likely to intensify activities aggressively in the field of counterintelligence and intelligence gathering as part of its preparations for unification by force. However, the transfer of communist espionage investigation authority from the NIS to the police may expose vulnerabilities in spy investigations. The South Korean government should devise measures to address potential gaps in communist espionage investigations resulting from the transfer of authority.

Fourth, the South Korean government, through trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan, should reaffirm the principle of complete denuclearization through sanctions against North Korea. This principle should be explicitly stated during summit meetings with allied and partner nations. Additionally, any arguments suggesting nuclear



disarmament or nuclear non-proliferation should be promptly criticized and opposed. South Korean experts and policymakers should assert that the prerequisite for nuclear disarmament or non-proliferation is South Korea possessing nuclear weapons. ©KINU 2024

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