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Implications of North Korea's Policies toward South Korea and Unification

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At the end of December 2023, North Korea convened the 9th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party, during which they announced the evaluation of the year's activities and presented the business policies for the year 2024. What particularly caught our attention in this plenary meeting of the party was unequivocally North Korea's policies toward South Korea and unification. Compared to the previous plenary meetings, a significant amount of time was allocated to them, and the contents were quite shocking.

North Korea declared a fundamental shift in its policies toward South Korea and unification and asserted the following: First, they argued that the hostile actions by South Korea and the US towards North Korea are now leading to actual military actions, and 'war' is no longer an abstract concept but an imminent reality. Second, over the past half-century, South Korea pursued unification by absorption under the basis of 'unification under a free democratic system,' and South Korea, which is a mere colony of the US, is no longer a counterpart for reconciliation and reunification. Third, the inter-Korean relationship is no longer based on ethnic and homogenous ties but has completely stagnated into two hostile nations at war. Fourth, if South Korea and the US attempt military confrontation, North Korea will subjugate the entire territories of South Korea by utilizing all means including nuclear capabilities. In summary, North

Korea not only denounced the history of inter-Korean relations over the past half-century as one of mistrust and confrontation but also signaled readiness for physical actions, including the use of its military capabilities.

However, the history of inter-Korean relations, despite periods of confrontation and conflict, has also seen times of reconciliation and cooperation—a true ebb and flow. Taking this into consideration, our focus is now on how long North Korea’s “high-handed and aggressive ultra-hardline policies” will persist, especially given the gravity of the current crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

Anticipated Policy Shift

It appears that North Korea’s ultra-hardline policy towards South Korea is likely to persist for a considerable period of time. The basis for this assessment is as follows: Firstly, North Korea did not hastily arrive at its current position; instead, it has been gradually accumulated over the past four years since the collapse of the Hanoi Summit between the US and North Korea in 2019. In late December 2019, North Korea, during the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee, proclaimed the so-called ‘new path,’ shifting its approach from dialogue and cooperation with the US to long-term confrontation and self-reliance. In 2020, they bombed the inter-Korean Liaison Office and changed the direction of their inter-Korean policies toward competition. In the 8th Party Congress in 2021, they stated that they ‘reflected on inter-Korean issues in line with the situation that has been created and changing demands of the times,’ deleting the obligation of members to ‘carry out Korean national liberation and people’s revolution,’ removing ‘Uriminzokkiri (among our nation)’ from the Rules of the Workers’ Party of Korea, and advocating ‘peace and unification through strength.’ In 2022, Kim, Jong-un and Kim, Yo-jong declared that they would not engage with South Korea in the future. Since 2023, they referred to South Korea as the ‘Republic of Korea’ instead of ‘South Korea’ or ‘the South,’ marking a change in terminology. During this process, the organization responsible for inter-Korean issues gradually shifted from the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country and the United Front Department to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Second, Kim, Jong-un even mentioned the policy failures of his predecessors. In October 2019, when Kim Jong-un criticized

the Mount Kumgang tourism project, a representative inter-Korean cooperation project initiated by Kim Jong-il as “wrong policies of the previous leaders,” it created significant repercussions. In this recent party congress, Kim, Jong-un claimed, “it has not been a mere decade but over more than half a century, not a single one of them has borne fruit, and North-South relations have repeated the vicious cycle of contact and suspension, dialogue and confrontation.” This statement can be interpreted as criticism directed towards Kim, Il-sung and Kim, Jong-il. Third, Kim, Jong-un went so far as to mention South Korea’s Constitution to reject reconciliation and unification. By referencing South Korea’s ‘principal enemy’ and clauses about its territory in the Constitution, Kim, Jong-un claimed that whether under conservative or progressive governments, South Korea has consistently maintained the principle of ‘unification under a free democratic system.’ Kim, Jong-un anticipates South Korea will continue to advocate for the collapse of the North Korean regime and unification by absorption, without making amendments to the Constitution. This highlights Kim Jong-un’s firm determination regarding the policy shift.

Strategic Calculation at the Time of Announcement

However, even if North Korea’s fundamental shift in its policies toward South Korea and unification is firm and sustained for a considerable period, there remains a question as to why it was publicly declared at this plenary meeting, and not at the 9th Party Congress in January 2026. Perhaps a hint can be derived from North Korea’s statement about the direction of its activities for 2024. of “expanding and actively utilizing the favorable situation and conditions gained through unyielding struggles over the past three years.” It seems that North Korea believes that the effectiveness of sanctions against North Korea is weakening against the backdrop of the new cold war involving the US, China, Russia, and North Korea, and that the influence of the US is declining in the course of the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas war. The extensive coverage of the military cooperation between the ROK, the US, and Japan in the Party Congress report, along with the public disclosure of photos of the leaders of the ROK, the US, and Japan on North Korean broadcasts, should be viewed as intentional actions

in this context. It seems that North Korea perceives the year 2024 as a golden opportunity to reproduce and benefit from what is termed the ‘paradoxical benefits of the Cold War,’ a time in which it obtained political, military, diplomatic, and economic support from major powers during the Cold War. Moreover, significant political events are scheduled for this year, such as the general elections in April in South Korea and the US Presidential Election in November. By escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula, North Korea aims to highlight the ‘failure’ of the ROK-US policies toward North Korea and take leadership in issues related to the Korean peninsula. Taking these factors into account, the official declaration of North Korea’s fundamental shift in its policies toward South Korea and unification is likely to be the result of a combination of factors accumulated over the long-term and of timing, the political schedule of Northeast Asia in 2024. Therefore, under the government of President Yoon, Suk-yeol, which is pursuing the ‘normalization of inter-Korean relations based on principles,’ it may not be easy to see a change in North Korea’s position. Moreover, although it is difficult to gauge, even if there is a possibility of the US resuming a dialogue with North Korea in the event of Mr. Trump being elected as the president, it might not directly lead to a dialogue between South Korea and North Korea. This is because North Korea may present preconditions for a dialogue that are difficult for South Korea to accept.

Policy Implications

Through North Korea’s policies toward South Korea and unification presented at the 9th Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the ruling Workers’ Party, we can derive several policy implications. First, is the official scrapping of North Korea’s position in the past, that the North Korean nuclear program is a ‘deterrence against the US.’ While there was a clause attached to it, such as ‘if a war breaks out due to provocations by the ROK and the US’, North Korea declared during the plenary meeting that it would use all means, including nuclear weapons, to subjugate the entire territories of South Korea in the event of war. North Korea’s statements about using nuclear weapons against South Korea have been sporadically made since 2022.

However, since Kim, Jong-un officially announced that it will no longer view inter-Korean relations as relations between one ethnic group, there has been a shift in North Korea's nuclear discourse from being a 'deterrence against the US' to a 'nuclear force possessed by Democratic People's Republic of Korea, a nuclear threat against the Republic of Korea.' Since North Korea's nuclear threat is expected to grow, firm and strong response measures against it must be prepared.

Second, since North Korea could be considering the outcomes of the US presidential election in its assertions, it is essential to prepare various policy alternatives following the outcome of the US presidential election. South Korea should contemplate its policy options in case Trump is re-elected as president and negotiations between the US and North Korea resume. Even if both the ROK and the US agree on the complete denuclearization of North Korea, there may be differences in the methodology each pursues. It is crucial to clearly communicate to US policymakers and think tanks that North Korea's exclusion of South Korea does not align with US interests. Additionally, preparations should be made to address many significant challenges, such as the goals and principles of the US-North Korea negotiations, and conditions for resuming inter-Korean dialogues.

Third, it is crucial to examine how Kim, Jong-un's statements on unification will impact future discussions on unification within the South Korean society. Although both South Korea and North Korea expressed aspirations for unification over the past 30 years, public sentiment on unification in the two countries have changed significantly. There has been a notable change, particularly in the perception of unification among South Koreans. According to the '2023 KINU Unification Survey', 64.9% of respondents acknowledged the necessity of unification. However, positive responses regarding the necessity of unification dropped to 35.3% among those aged 19 to 29, compared to 55.6% among those aged 60 and above. In the National Barometer Survey (NBS) conducted in July 2023, 40% of respondents stated that unification is absolutely necessary. What's interesting is that the most desirable form of unification was 'two countries where people can freely travel (58%),' while only 18% preferred a single, unified country¹⁾. Against this backdrop, the top leader of North Korea officially declared that unification is impossible. This has broken the taboo of the current reality

of the Korean peninsula. Raising an issue about unification by one party is bound to have an influence on the other. Kim, Jong-un's statement on unification could serve as a catalyst for expanding future discussions on inter-Korean relations and unification. The Korean government should establish a venue for realistic and desirable discussions on unification. ©KINU 2024

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1) This is the results of a survey conducted by Embrain Public, KSTAT Research, Korea Research, and Hankook Research, from July 17 to July 19, 2023, targeting 1,001 men and women aged 18 and above. The margin of error is ± 3.1 at 95% confidence level. For detailed information, please refer to the website of the National Elections Survey Deliberation Commission. <<https://www.nesdc.go.kr>> (Accessed on January 8, 2024).