

Interpreting North Korea's Joint New Year's Editorial

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On January 1, 2011, North Korea released its annual joint editorial via three publications - *Rodong Sinmun*, *Korean People's Army and Socialist Youth League*. The editorial was entitled, "This year, let us once again accelerate light industry to improve the people's lives and achieve a strong and prosperous country." The key phrases of this year's editorial were "light industry," "improving the people's lives," and "a strong and prosperous country," but an overall reduction in ideological slogans and rhetoric, along with a greater emphasis on practical language, seem to indicate a weaker and more defensive position.

Analyzed by category, this year's editorial shows the following characteristics. First, the editorial predicted that this year will be "a year of general offensive, when a radical turn should be brought about in the building of a thriving nation by kindling more fiercely the flames of great upsurge in improving the people's standard of living," hinting that the coming year will be a time of preparation for 2012 in which the people's mass efforts will be mobilized more strongly than ever. In anticipation of the "greatest celebration" upon reaching the 100th anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth next year (the year of achieving a strong and prosperous country, they are calling for a "general advance and general offensive" in order to

“complete the 100-year history of Kim Il Sung’s Korea.”

Second, on the political front, the editorial focused its content on Kim Jong Il and made no direct mention of the successor Kim Jong Eun by name, underscoring Kim Jong Il’s continued grip on power. However, by emphasizing that “a basic foundation for continuous revolution has been prepared” through the past year’s “remarkable political festival,” they appear to be planning to further accelerate the succession system. Kim Jong Eun’s frequent visits to front-line production sites, accompanied by Kim Jong Il and Kim Kyung Hee, indicate an intention to use “the light industry revolution” and “achievements in constructing an economically strong country” to help normalize the succession system. If things proceed quickly, Kim Jong Eun may achieve the rank of marshal and take over as supreme commander by the end of this year, on the 20th anniversary of Kim Jong Il’s appointment as supreme commander (2011.12.24). Already on December 24th, 2010, at the ceremony commemorating the anniversary of Kim Jong Il becoming supreme commander, Kim Jong Il made an irregular appearance along with Kim Jong Eun and high-level military officials. This move may have been intended to celebrate Kim Jong Il’s “achievements in military leadership” and pass on commanding powers to Kim Jong Eun.

Third, in South Korean relations, the basic line appears to be nearly unchanged from last year. However, while shifting responsibility for inter-Korean tensions to the “conservative south Korean authorities” and inflaming the “struggle to maintain peace” within our society, they also emphasized that “Active efforts should be made to create an atmosphere of dialogue and cooperation between north and south,” making a show of flexibility toward the South in order to focus on internal issues.

Fourth, regarding external issues, the editorial showed both hard-line and moderate elements. It assessed that Kim Jong Il’s two visits to China “created an environment favourable for our revolution” and opposed “imperialist high-handedness and arbitrariness,” and clarified the North’s intention “to achieve denuclearization.” Unlike last year, this year’s editorial did not take an assertive stance on the issues of constructing a peace regime and pursuing US-DPRK dialogue.

The contents of the 2011 joint editorial hint at North Korea’s need to be prepared for both war and peace. Its future policy direction will likely focus on strengthening the *songun* system and defense capability, while adding to Kim Jong Eun’s list of achievements with a focus on military adventurism and concentrating on stabilizing the guardianship government. They may seek to achieve stronger internal solidarity and greater control over the public through the security mechanisms of the *songun* system which form the backbone of the guardianship government. In particular, as the current instability within North Korea and the unpredictability of its policies toward South Korea and the international community have grown interlinked with the progress of the succession system and show no signs of declining, we should remain wary of

possible future provocations against South Korea. We should consider North Korea's provocative acts of 2010 as valuable lessons exposing the dangers of our situation, and prepare both pre-emptive deterrent measures and effective systems of post-incident crisis management.

At the same time, this year's editorial, like last year's, declared the major national goal to be achieving "a decisive turn in the improvement of the people's standard of living" through increases in production in light industry; since firmly establishing the succession system is an urgent task, they have a greater motivation to show a moderate attitude externally in order to focus on internal political and economic problems. The North's positive statements about improving inter-Korean relations and promoting South-North reconciliation and cooperation may reflect economic problems which cannot be resolved through self-rehabilitation. In order to focus on their internal problems they are hoping to reduce external pressure and sanctions, and even obtain technical and material aid from outside.

Therefore, this year in inter-Korean relations we should make use of the North's defensive posture to drive South-North dialogue forward and expand our influence over the North, while working directly to create opportunities to ease anxieties of war. North Korea's emphasis on the need for inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation despite the aggravation of tensions over the past year demonstrates the increased need for South-North communication due to internal problems.

Therefore, the central goals of our North Korea policy should be achieving denuclearization and blocking North Korea's provocations at their source, and the most essential step in this direction is to obtain a specific statement from the North on denuclearization as well as a clear apology for the military provocations of 2010 and a promise to take systematic measures to prevent their recurrence. Even if North Korean aid is restarted, it must be carried out in accordance with agreements on these issues and the principles of "proportion and reciprocity." Until tangible progress is made toward denuclearization, the development of inter-Korean relations must proceed in tandem with international cooperation on North Korean sanctions.

Furthermore, we can anticipate more false peace overtures and unification strategies aimed at South Korea's internal divisions and its political situation in 2012 (with the general and presidential elections looming), and thus we must closely watch such developments. In North Korea's tactics toward the South, they have always followed up their provocative acts with overtures for dialogue. North Korea may attempt stronger political offensives on the issues of inter-Korean cooperation and unification, such as calling for "exchanges and contacts at various levels" and pushing for implementation of the South-North Joint Declaration.

We must respond to the North's schemes to create rifts within South Korean society by building a unified national discourse, strengthening unification education, attempting to

communicate directly with forces that ideologically differ from the current governing faction, and enabling broad non-partisan consensus regarding our understanding of North Korea.

Finally, we must enhance our diplomatic efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue and ease the confrontational structure in Northeast Asia. North Korea has been sending contradictory messages, threatening that it has “an ultra-modern uranium enrichment facility containing thousands of centrifuges operating regularly” while also claiming that its “position on denuclearization remains unchanged.” As long as it adheres to its hard-and-soft tactics, professing a desire for dialogue while emphasizing “closer relations with China” and opposition to “the forces of imperialism,” the countries concerned will have to work through such mechanisms as US-China summits to prevent North Korea from taking advantage of regional conflicts for its own practical gain.