

Factors behind North Korea's Concentrated Charm Offensive toward the South

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Over the last month of January, North Korea has opened up a charm offensive toward the South through a variety of acts and gestures. They have mobilized all the various leading organizations involved in inter-Korean dialogue (with the exception of the Party's United Front Department), including the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland, the Asia-Pacific Peace Committee, and the People's Armed Forces Ministry. They have also proposed talks between relevant officials of the Red Cross, Mt. Kumgang tourism, and the Kaesong Industrial Complex, as well as military talks and National Assembly contacts. At the same time, the North Korean media has been making statements on a nearly daily basis praising the "groundbreaking measures to break down barriers" while urging our government's "prompt and unconditional response."

North Korea's Proposals for Dialogue in January 2011

Proposal Platform	Major Details of Proposal
1.1 New Year's Joint Editorial	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Emphasis on "the need to directly promote dialogue and cooperation" between the two Koreas
1.5 Joint Statement by government, Party and civic organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ 4-Point "Major Proposal"<ul style="list-style-type: none">① A broad-based call for dialogue with South Korean government, party and civic groups, ② Willingness to meet with anyone seeking to work with the North, ③ Possibility of discussion on all issues including reduction of tensions, peace, reconciliation and unity, ④ Mutual cessation of slander and provocative rhetoric○ Particular emphasis on "unconditionally and immediately convening meetings of government officials"

<p>1.8 Commentary by a spokesman for the Committee for Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Proposal to restart various talks between relevant officials of the Red Cross, Mt. Kumgang tourism, and the Kaesong Industrial Complex ○ Announcement of reopening the inter-Korean communication channel via Panmunjom and unfreezing the inter-Korean economic cooperation office ○ Emphasis that “Our proposals are unconditional and there is no reason to doubt our sincerity.”
<p>1.10 Communiqué by the Asia Pacific Peace Committee, the North Korean Red Cross, and the Joint Office of Economic Cooperation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Suggestion of schedule and location for working-level government contacts and Red Cross talks ○ Announcement on re-opening of the Panmunjom communication channel (1.12) and restarting regular operations at the Joint Office of Economic Cooperation
<p>1.20 Public statement by the People’s Armed Forces Ministry</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Proposal submitted to the ROK Defense Minister for “high-level inter-Korean military talks” and preliminary talks “in order to clarify our position on the Cheonan incident and the Yeonpyeong Island battle and relieve tensions on the peninsula.”
<p>1.28 Appeal by the Democratic Front for the Reunification of the Fatherland</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ An “Appeal to All the People of Korea” which pressed for official talks as well as contacts between National Assembly members of the two Koreas
<p>1.29 Official communiqué by the NK military authorities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In response to the South’s counter-proposal for working-level military talks on Feb. 11th, the North proposed “moving the date up to Feb. 1st”
<p>1.31 Asia-Pacific Peace Committee communiqué</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Request to the ROK Unification Ministry to hold talks immediately, as “all obstacles to dialogue have been removed.”

There are several characteristics of this charm offensive worth mentioning. First, it shows that the North is focused on re-starting official dialogue with the South. They have put extra emphasis on restarting government-level talks, mentioning “broad-based dialogue” between government and civic groups as has been done in the past and also proposing National Assembly-level contacts. What is more, the communiqué the APPC sent to the Unification Ministry on January 31st claimed that “All obstacles to dialogue have been removed by our military’s proposal for open-minded high-level military talks,” and thus “The time has come for the authorities to sit down together and talk,” suggesting that even these military talks are an expedient for bringing about governmental talks.

Second, with their emphasis on “sincerity,” they seem to almost be challenging our side to respond. They initially uttered various threats of “nuclear catastrophe” (1.1) or “armed conflict” (1.5) breaking out if the current phase of inter-Korean confrontation continues, but as time passed they shifted to more beseeching tones, saying “Our proposals are unconditional and there is no reason to doubt our sincerity.” (1.8) As for the agenda, the North has said they could discuss “any issues of mutual interest” (1.31) and cited issues of particular concern to the South such as reunions of divided families. Of course, they stipulated that the nuclear issue is “a problem brought on by the hostile policy of the US” (1.26 Foreign Ministry spokesman’s statement) and therefore it cannot be resolved via inter-Korean dialogue and must be dealt with directly between the US and the DPRK.

Third, North Korea is drawing attention to the fact that they are the ones taking the lead in transitioning to a new phase of dialogue. Claiming that the threat of war has been “temporarily abated through our direct efforts” and hailing the proposal for talks as “a groundbreaking major decision, an act of devotion to the people and the nation,” (1.28) the North Korean authorities urged not only us but all the countries involved to make “a resolute decision to seize the opportunity for dialogue.” (1.26 Foreign Ministry) They particularly hinted that Kim Jong Il was behind this decision. The Xinhua News Agency reported that North Korea’s push for inter-Korean dialogue “was not done on impulse but was a decision made by the leader after intense consideration,” and the *Chosun Shinbo* assessed that the phrase “the new decade of the 21st Century will become the link to unification and prosperity” used in the New Year’s Editorial and the Joint Statement was “a focused appeal based on the leader’s own design and will.” (1.26) In truth, without a direct order from Kim Jong Il it would have been impossible for the North to make such a focused drive for dialogue.

What reasons could the North have for focusing on inter-Korean dialogue in this way? In the view of South Korean experts, possible motives include acquiring economic aid, disrupting our government’s North Korea policy, and acquiring moral justification in the eyes of international society. It could be because they urgently need to secure rice, fertilizer, and foreign currency from the South in order to achieve the “improvements in the peoples’ lifestyles” that they have been trumpeting. Or, there could be political considerations at play: i.e., by making a deliberate show of dialogue they may be hoping to shift the fundamental blame for their own “bad behavior” onto our government, and then take advantage of the upcoming general and presidential elections in 2012 to break down the South’s hard-line policy. Or, this could be an attempt to approach the US and get out of international sanctions while expanding their sources of economic aid in consideration of China’s position.

The answer lies with North Korea’s internal situation. Examining the North’s policy selection process, a peculiarity of this regime which insists on “Juche” (self-reliance) is that it will occasionally, due to domestic needs, seek a breakthrough in its external relations, always prioritizing the stability of autocratic one-man rule in a system where political logic trumps economic logic. It appears that the motive behind their concentrated dialogue offensive is “to acquire money and buy time in order to pull off a magnificent political festival in 2012.” Toward the end of last year the North Korean leadership decided to move into a phase of conciliation toward the South in order to make sufficient preparations for next year’s political event, and various organizations are currently working diligently to carry out that order. If government-level talks are held in the future they will not conceal their true intentions.

In North Korea, 2012 is to be the year of “the celebration of 3 generations of great leaders.” From early this year, North Korea has been urging the public to “consolidate the 100-year history of Kim Il Sung’s Korea” and prepare to greet the late Great Leader’s 100th birthday (4.15) in 2012 as “the greatest festival and most magnificent event in human history.” Next year North Korea will celebrate Kim Jong Il’s 70th birthday on February 16th and the 80th Anniversary of Military Founding Day on April 25th (North Korea retroactively considers the creation of the so-called “Korean People’s Revolutionary Army” in 1932 as the origin of its military). The North Korean people must celebrate the military-first rule of the “Present Leader.” If sufficient funds remain, in the fall they may hold a festival to celebrate the “Future Leader.” Around the time of the Korean Worker’s Party Founding Day (10.10) they are expected to convene the 7th Party Congress in the name of “consolidating the 100-year history of Kim Il Sung’s nation,” and at that point they may formally assign the number two post in the Party to Kim Jong Eun. They may kick off this series of political events toward the end of this year, on the 20th anniversary of Kim Jong Il’s promotion to KPA supreme commander (12.24), by passing that title to Kim Jong Eun. To congratulate themselves on the “blessing of 3 generations of great leaders,” in 2012 North Korea must hold a series of political celebrations including gaudy fireworks displays, magnificent celebratory feasts, large-scale military parades, construction of new housing complexes, etc. In order to prepare to usher in this “greatest and most magnificent festival” it is essential that the regime provide high-quality gifts for the loyal officials who have supported the succession, as well as unusually generous “distributions” of goods to the common people.

This year’s economic mobilization provides the answer to how the North Korean authorities plan to pay for next year’s “celebration expenses.” They will try to cut this year’s expenses as much as possible in order to save for next year. They will tell the people that they must tighten their belts to the limit this year so that they can enjoy “white rice and meat soup” next year. This is a kind of short-term solution. At all costs they must acclaim next year as the dawn of “a great and powerful country,” so this year they are appealing to the people to step up and act as “an advancing army for improving the people’s livelihoods.” They will repeat the words of the “Song of Victory” which was composed during the “Arduous March” period of the 1990s, urging the people, “Do not live for today, live for tomorrow.” There may be a reprise of mass mobilization efforts like that of ten years ago, when the people worked “like ants gnawing meat off a bone.”

North Korea’s recent charm offensive is connected to their current internal situation and their need to mobilize the whole population to prepare for next year’s political festival. By creating opportunities for inter-Korean dialogue and building an “atmosphere of peace” in the region, they hope to buy time to focus on their internal problems. With our govern-

ment refusing to cave in to their threats, North Korea must continue to bear the expense of maintaining a state of military readiness as well as the opportunity costs brought on by the concentrated mobilization of soldiers and young laborers at production sites. The heightened inter-Korean tensions have not only affected the South but have also had an influence on the small-scale planned economy of the North. Scarcities have been exacerbated due to hoarding and panic buying, making it difficult for the authorities to stockpile goods. The steep rises in the price of rice and foreign exchange rates in the North following the Yeonpyeong attack were also spurred on by panic buying as fears of war spread by word-of-mouth among the people.

The North Korean regime has calculated that it will be better for them if they can secure the needed materials and funding for next year's events from the South in exchange for dialogue. North Korea has been emphasizing that "Both North and South can benefit from dialogue." The basic implication is, "Give us economic aid and we'll hold off on the threats and provocations." Some time has passed since foreign aid to North Korea was sharply decreased, and a considerable portion of their emergency stores has been exhausted. Their economy is in such a sad state that without outside help they cannot possibly hope to achieve the promised improvement in living standards, much less prepare a lavish celebration for the Great Leader's birthday. The North Korean authorities seem to have judged that their pleas to the international community might be ineffective, and anyway the response time would be slow. But via inter-Korean talks, if they can strike clever political bargains through a combination of threats and begging, they may be able to rapidly secure an aid deal. When the North presses the South for an "unconditional, immediate restart of dialogue," what they are really asking for is an "unconditional, immediate restart of aid."

Last year's sinking of the Cheonan and the artillery attack against Yeonpyeong Island hint at where the North Korean leadership's priorities are and how likely they are to continue their reckless and aggressive policies in the future. Their execution of provocative acts amidst increasing demands for inter-Korean dialogue show that their priorities are focused less on managing inter-Korean relations and more on showing off the "boldness" of designated successor Kim Jong Eun. This reckless thinking has been encouraged by the need to force military officials to acknowledge Kim Jong Eun's "bold military command abilities" to prevent him from being dismissed or belittled, as well as the desire to "teach the South a lesson to get them moving again." In all likelihood this rash and aggressive streak in North Korea's domestic and foreign policies will only grow worse as power is transferred to Kim Jong Eun. This means that the burden for our government in managing inter-Korean relations will grow larger, and it explains why we must ceaselessly seek affirmation of the North's "sincerity" during the process of reopening inter-Korean dialogue. If their internal situation continues

to deteriorate and the external environment does not change in their favor, they are likely to make more provocations in the future.

If the North is facing a dire situation internally and desperately needs our help, they must change their South Korea policy appropriately. They must cease their habitual practice of making provocations. One way that they can clearly show their sincerity towards dialogue is by putting the banner of “reform and opening” before the banner of “a strong and prosperous country.” 2012 will mark a full decade since the North attempted its “July 1st Economic Management Improvement Measures.” Back then, for a brief moment we held high hopes for North Korea.