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Changes to the National Strategy of the Kim Jong-un Regime and the Limitations of the Strategy of Self-Reliance

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When categorized by significant changes to its national strategy, phase 1 of the Kim Jong-un regime from 2011 to 2017 can be defined as the period where it focused on consolidating its ruling base and developing nuclear and missile technologies. Phase 2 from 2018 to 2020 was a period during which the regime defined economic development as the primary objective and sought to improve relations with South Korea and the U.S. through summit diplomacy. The policy of self-reliance adopted at the 8th Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in January 2021 represents partial changes to the previous strategy in response to the failure in achieving the goals set during phase 2, and thus can be viewed as phase 2.5 beginning in 2021. The problem is that the policy of self-reliance alone is insufficient for the overall governance of phase 2.5, and that it will not accomplish the goals of the new five-year national economic development plan.

There are several different ways to distinguish the phases of the Kim Jong-un regime that has now entered its 10th year in power. Based on significant changes to its national strategy, the Kim Jong-un regime can be divided into the first phase between 2011 and 2017, the second phase between 2018 and 2020, and phase 2.5

beginning in 2021 during which there have been partial changes to the strategy from the previous phase. The North Korean regime had concentrated on consolidating its ruling base as well as developing its nuclear and missile capabilities during phase 1, whereas the regime defined economic development as its primary policy objective and attempted to improve its relations with South Korea and the U.S. through summit diplomacy during phase 2. The policy of self-reliance adopted at the 8th Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) convened in January 2021 represented partial changes to the previous strategy in response to the failure in achieving the goals set in phase 2, and thus can be viewed as the beginning of phase 2.5. However, the limitations of the policy of self-reliance have been exposed throughout North Korea's history. Moreover, the self-reliance strategy is problematic because it is hardly a fundamental solution to the issues facing North Korea.

■ Phase 1: Consolidating the Ruling Base and the Policy of Simultaneously Developing the Economy and Nuclear Weapons

Kim Jong-un, who succeeded Kim Jong-il after his death in December 2011, was an unprepared leader in his mid-20s at the time. His ruling base was weak compared to his forefathers, and North Korea's international status had been diminished. Kim Il-sung had a firm power base given his experience fighting for guerilla groups against Japan as well as his political assets in establishing the North Korean system and achieving socialist industrialization. Kim Jong-il, who was designated as Kim Il-sung's successor in 1974, cultivated a strong support base as he prepared for the succession of power for more than twenty years, and was more or less jointly ruling North Korea by the time Kim Il-sung died. In contrast, Kim Jong-un, who was designated as the successor in 2009 and had about three years to prepare for succession until Kim Jong-il died, did not have the political assets that his predecessors possessed. Moreover, North Korea's international status that had been severely damaged due to the Arduous March during which hundreds of thousands

of North Koreans died of starvation had not yet been restored. Given such circumstances, securing a firm ruling base and enhancing North Korea's international status emerged as immediate tasks, and Kim Jong-un chose to quickly restructure the ruling system and pursue the policy of simultaneously developing the economy and nuclear weapons.

First of all, Kim Jong-un chose the path of restructuring the existing ruling system to create his own ruling base rather than relying on the political legacies of his forefathers. Not long after his leadership began, he purged the former Chief of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army Ri Yong-ho in July 2012, and executed his uncle and former director of the Administration Department of the WPK Jang Song Thaek in December 2013. Not only were Ri and Jang among the eight North Korean officials that accompanied Kim Jong-il's hearse but were also officials that Kim Jong-un trusted and had served as his de facto custodians. It seems possible that Kim Jong-un perceived them as political threats. With the retirement of the former chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly Choe Thae-bok during the 2nd plenary meeting of the 7th term of the WPK held in October 2016, the eight individuals that had escorted Kim Jong-il's hearse except Kim Jong-un had now either been purged or removed. Furthermore, several high-ranking Party, government, and military officials, including former vice-premier Kim Yong-jin and former Minister of the People's Armed Forces Hyun Yong-chol, were unable to avoid executions or purges. After the assassination of his half-brother Kim Jong-nam in Malaysia in February 2017, Kim Jong-un has more or less eliminated every potential political rival. There have been no reports of purges of high-ranking North Korean officials ever since.

To rehabilitate North Korea's international standing, Kim Jong-un chose the policy of simultaneously developing the economy and nuclear weapons. At the time, Korea's traditional policy of simultaneously developing the military and the economy (*Byungjin*) alone was not perceived to be enough to counter the combined military capabilities of South Korea and the U.S. and their overwhelming advantage in conventional forces given the state of the North Korean economy. The advantage

of nuclear weapons is that it is a cost-effective asymmetric weapon. The policy of simultaneously developing the economy and nuclear weapons adopted at the plenary meeting of the WPK held in March 2013 was effectively a strategy to ‘develop nuclear weapons first and then develop the economy,’ and Kim Jong-un concentrated resources on developing North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missiles. North Korea has conducted six nuclear tests to date, the first two of which occurred during 20 years from when the *Yongbyon* nuclear facilities were first discovered in September 1989 till the death of Kim Jong-il in December 2011. In comparison, Kim Jong-un has intensively conducted nuclear tests during his regime, with four nuclear tests conducted during a five-year period between the third nuclear test in February 2013 and the sixth test in September 2017. According to North Korean claims, the two nuclear tests conducted under Kim Jong-il were in the preliminary stages of nuclear weapons development, with a ‘nuclear explosion’ tested during the first nuclear testing and ‘improving the yield’ being the objective of the second. Contrastingly, the tests conducted under Kim Jong-un represent robust efforts to complete the development of its nuclear arsenal evidenced by the fact that they tested ‘miniaturization and lightweighting’ in the third testing, the ‘hydrogen bomb’ in the fourth testing, ‘nuclear warheads’ in the fifth, and ‘nuclear warheads for intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs)’ in the sixth nuclear testing, respectively.

Mid- to long-range ballistic missiles also began to be test-launched intensively. Though ICBM-level rockets such as *Taepodong-1* and *Taepodong-2* were test-launched during the Kim Jong-il era, North Korea had claimed that they were space-launch vehicles (SLVs). In fact, these tests did not attempt atmospheric re-entry, a prerequisite for ballistic missiles. Though mid-range missiles such as *Musudan* were identified during the Kim Jong-il regime, they were deployed in the field without any test launches. However, the Kim Jong-un regime has intensively test-launched mid- to long-range ballistic missiles including the *Musudan*, *Hwasong-12*, *Hwasong-14*, and *Hwasong-15*. In particular, North Korea surprised the world on November 29, 2017, by launching *Hwasong-15* with its range of approximately 12,000km and ability to strike the mainland of the U.S. Kim Jong-un

officially declared the completion of North Korea's nuclear arsenal immediately after this particular test launch.

The Kim Jong-un regime can thus be viewed as having completed the power succession process, consolidated its ruling base, and achieved the status of a de facto nuclear capable country by the end of 2017.

■ Phase 2: Policy of All-out Concentration on Economic Building and Summit Diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula

The next policy choice of the Kim Jong-un regime after it had secured its power base and nuclear capabilities was developing the economy and improving relations with South Korea and the U.S. North Korea held the 3rd plenary meeting of the 7th term of the Central Committee of the WPK in April 2018 and announced the conclusion (end) of the policy of simultaneously developing the economy and nuclear weapons, and adopted the policy of all-out concentration on economic-building. This can be interpreted as an effort to reallocate resources that were dedicated to the development of nuclear weapons to gain momentum for the development of the economy. North Korea ceased its nuclear tests and mid- to long-range missile test launches after the sixth nuclear test in September 2017 and the test launch of *Hwasong-15* in November later that year. Improved inter-Korean relations are required to solve the systemic problems of the North Korean economy, and better relations with the U.S. are necessary for the lifting of sanctions. These are the reasons why Kim Jong-un began to engage in consecutive summit talks on the Korean Peninsula beginning in early 2018.

In his new year statement on January 1, 2018, Kim Jong-un signaled his willingness to initiate talks by stating that “the paths to dialogue and diplomatic exchanges are open to anyone including not only officials of the ruling party in South Korea but also any organization or individual as long as they sincerely desire national reconciliation and unity.” Later, Kim Yo-jong, who was at the time the deputy director of the WPK, visited South Korea by leading the North Korean team at the 2018

PyeongChang Winter Olympics, marking the first time a member of the ruling Kim dynasty had visited South Korea since the Korean War. North Korea's participation in the PyeongChang games indicated the start of Kim Jong-un's summit diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula.

Kim Jong-un had secured allies for the upcoming summit meetings with South Korea and the U.S. by visiting China for the first time in March 2018 and restoring relations between China and North Korea. At the inter-Korean Panmunjeom summit meeting held on April 27, the two Korean leaders agreed to the improvement of bilateral relations and the goal of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, and this led to the U.S.-North Korea Singapore summit meeting held on June 12. Moreover, the leaders of South and North Korea put in writing the intent to permanently close the nuclear facilities at *Yongbyon* through the Pyongyang Declaration in September, thereby crafting a core agenda item for the U.S.-North Korea summit in Hanoi. Despite high expectations, however, the Hanoi summit collapsed. In his statement in April 2019, Kim Jong-un set the deadline for negotiations with the U.S. for the end of the year and announced that he would embark on a new path if it was not met. North Korea and the U.S. merely confirmed their differences at the working-level negotiations between North Korea and the U.S. held in Stockholm in October 2019 which ended without any progress being made, and the momentum behind Kim Jong-un's active summit diplomacy that began in 2018 was significantly weakened.

In December 2019, North Korea convened the 5th plenary meeting of the 7th term of the WPK and adopted the strategy of engaging in a head-on breakthrough battle. The strategy effectively involves maintaining its stance stated during negotiations with the U.S. and demanding concessions from Washington. The strategy of head-on breakthrough battle encountered obstacles, however, as the resiliency of the regime has weakened due to sustained sanctions imposed against North Korea, along with the Covid-19 pandemic and flooding that caused massive damages. At the Central Committee of the WPK in August 2020, Kim Jong-un admitted the failure of the strategy of engaging in a head-on breakthrough battle by noting that "the growth

goals set for the national economy have been severely unfulfilled and the lives of the people have not significantly improved as a result.” The completion of the Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist area construction project in which North Korea has invested its state capacity remains uncertain despite the completion of the project being postponed several times. The goal of building the Pyongyang General Hospital, which Kim Jong-un has ordered to be completed by the 75th anniversary of the founding of the WPK on October 10, 2020 and has encouraged on numerous occasions, was also unmet. These were the reasons why Kim Jong-un expressed remorse for the people of North Korea and shed a tear at the military parade commemorating the 75th anniversary of the WPK.

In his tenth year as leader, Kim Jong-un faces an overwhelmingly difficult situation due to sanctions against North Korea, the COVID-19 pandemic, and flood damages. In the short-term, this is indicative of the limitations of Kim Jong-un’s summit diplomacy which he conducted beginning in early 2018. In the long-term, this can be viewed as a strategic failure of his ten years in power.

■ Phase 2.5: The Policy of Self-Reliance and Its Systemic Limitations

Though North Korea held the 8th Party Congress of the WPK in January 2021 and established its new five-year national economic development plan, the regime can be considered as being in the 2.5 phase as it mostly continues the previous strategy. Kim Jong-un stressed the policy of self-reliance in order to implement the five-year national economic development plan, and has highlighted strengthening the military and economic development as the two primary goals. Moreover, he emphasized the chemical and metal industries as the most important industries. However, the new five-year national economic development plan and the policy of self-reliance are not that different from previous strategies, and have policy-related confusion and systemic limitations as a strategy that has already failed in the past.

First, the simultaneous promotion of building a stronger military and developing the economy is the ‘second season version of the policy of simultaneously developing

the economy and nuclear weapons' which will be hard to achieve under the current circumstances. At the 8th Party Congress of the WPK, Kim Jong-un ordered the development of a fleet of hypersonic glide vehicles, solid-fuel engines for underwater and land-use, intercontinental ballistic rockets, nuclear submarines and underwater strategic nuclear weapons, and military satellites in the near future. However, these weapons require highly advanced technology that only a few countries like the U.S. and Russia have, and its development will require more resources than the development of nuclear warheads. It will be difficult for North Korea to develop these technologies soon even if it sacrifices the entire economy, and therefore the simultaneous strengthening of the military and economic development is an initiative that will be impossible to accomplish.

The development of the chemical and metal industries that Kim Jong-un emphasized as core industries will be almost impossible to achieve under the current sanctions regime and North Korea's international isolation. The chemical industry in the modern industrial era is based on oil, and this is why the term petrochemical industry was created. North Korea does not produce oil domestically, and oil imports are strictly restricted by the sanctions regime. In other words, North Korea does not have an environment in which the petrochemical industry can grow. North Korea attempted the development of the 'C1 Chemical industry' that uses coal as the raw material for the chemical industry but was unsuccessful. North Korea also relies on the import of cokes which is necessary for the production of steel that is central to the metal industry. North Korea has concentrated on the production of topic iron by using anthracite coal that is abundant in North Korea, but its success is unclear. Instead of using cokes, the production method of topic iron produces molten metal with anthracite coal and electricity, but North Korea already faces a chronic shortage of electricity. The reality is that even elevators in high-rise apartments in Pyongyang are operated part-time, and electricity rather than topic iron is more in dire need for the people's economy of North Korea.

At the 2nd plenary meeting of the 8th term of the WPK in February held not long after the conclusion of the 8th Party Congress of the WPK, Kim Jong-un criticized

the passive and self-protecting tendencies revealed by the state economic guidance organs in the course of setting this year's goals, and stressed that "complete control over sections of the economy by certain entities (unit specialization) and the practice of prioritizing group needs over national needs (self-centeredness) will ... be dealt with sternly." Though North Korea considers politics by a selected number of powerful families, bureaucratism, and corruption as anti-Party and anti-revolutionary acts by individuals, unit specialization and self-centeredness are deemed certain factions and groups's behavior. Currently, these issues specifically apply to the so-called special economies associated with the Party and the military, both of which are the two core pillars of the Kim Jong-un regime. While Kim Jong-un has repeatedly stressed a cabinet system of government for the economy, the WPK yields exclusive economic power that exceeds that of the Cabinet. For example, Office 39 of the WPK, the safe for Kim Jong-un's secret funds, oversees a wide range of economy-related organizations and their privileges. Most military bases in North Korea are required to self-supply most of their supplies including food, and independently run farms, fisheries, and even coal mines. The military-first policy of the Kim Jong-il regime overlooked privileges of the military in order to gain loyalty. It is systematically difficult for North Korea to return most of the resources and privileges back to the people's economy—resources currently controlled by the WPK and the military, two groups central to the Kim Jong-un regime's power base.

The new five-year national economic development plan and the policy of self-reliance that the Kim Jong-un regime has adopted in 2021 are initiatives that will be difficult to achieve given that there is confusion regarding policies as well as the fact that they inherently have systematic limitations. North Korea's economic crisis will be exacerbated if the regime maintains these strategies, and the possibility that this might expand into a general crisis of the regime also can not be excluded.

■ Suggestions for the Sincere Implementation of the Principle of ‘Serving the People is Serving the Heaven (以民爲天)’

The Kim Jong-un regime is entering its 10th year in power despite various pessimistic forecasts when the regime began. It is possible to consider efforts to strengthen the ruling base and the policy of simultaneously developing the economy and nuclear weapons pursued in phase 1, and the policy of all-out concentration on economic-building and summit diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula during phase 2, as proactive national strategies attempted by the Kim Jong-un regime. In contrast, the policy of self-reliance in phase 2.5 is more of a forced-choice based on realizations of the limitations of the strategies promoted during the first and second phases. The problems are that the policy of self-reliance is insufficient for overall governing of phase 2.5, and that the new five-year national economic development plan will be impossible to accomplish under the current situation of economic isolation.

Through the 8th Party Congress of the WPK and the 2nd plenary meeting of the 8th term of the WPK, Kim Jong-un ordered the eradication of anti-socialism and non-socialism as well as the firm establishment of rules. This has been followed by institutional reforms such as the formation of the department of rule investigation and the department of justice. The intent to strengthen control in order to suppress internal discontent and prevent social unrest seems clear. But North Korea needs to find ways to solve its problems not domestically but through its relationships with South Korea and the U.S., and this must start with inter-Korean relations. There is a need to remember the role of the South Korean government that began to intensively pursue the Korean Peninsula peace process. It was South Korea that facilitated the U.S.-North Korea Singapore summit meeting on June 12, 2018, through the inter-Korean Panmunjeom summit on April 27, and it was also Seoul that created the agenda item for the Hanoi summit between North Korea and the U.S. by stating in writing the permanent dismantlement of the *Yongbyon* nuclear facilities in the Pyongyang Declaration later in September. The trilateral summit meeting at

Panmunjeom between South Korea, North Korea, and the U.S. was also made possible by the role of the South Korean government inviting President Trump to Seoul. North Korea should not focus on criticizing South Korea but rediscover the role of the South Korean government.

Most officials in charge of diplomacy and national security in the Biden administration are deeply mistrustful of North Korea and are more cautious about approaching North Korea compared to the previous administration. Another characteristic is how the Biden administration is emphasizing solidarity with allies centered on universal values such as democracy and human rights. Top-down negotiations like those that were based on the personal relationship between President Trump and Kim Jong-un are also unlikely to occur. There are not even any diplomatic channels between North Korea and the U.S. at the moment. Unless the current stalemate is resolved, the Korean Peninsula peace process including negotiations on denuclearization between North Korea and the U.S. will likely continue to stagnate, and the largest burden will fall on North Korea.

Whenever given the opportunity, Kim Jong-un has stressed that 'serving the people is serving the heaven' by proclaiming the people-first principle. But North Korea's economic crisis will intensify and the lives of the people will worsen if North Korea maintains its current policy of self-reliance. The South Korean government is ready to play the role of facilitator not only to improve inter-Korean relations but also resume negotiations between North Korea and the U.S. on denuclearization. Given that the current administration in South Korea is entering the last years of its term, 2021 will likely be the golden time for the Korean Peninsula peace process. After this year, the political calendar in South Korea will shift to the upcoming power transition phase which will likely weaken any momentum for the Korean Peninsula peace process. This is why Kim Jong-un must return to his earlier mindset from 2018 and participate in the restarting of the Korean Peninsula peace process. Kim Jong-un's call that serving the people is serving the heaven will become a reality, rather than merely remain a slogan, if the two Koreas restore mutual trust and pursue comprehensive agreements as well as step-by-step implementation based on a

sincere desire to denuclearize.

The South Korean government should increase its efforts to ensure the irreversible entry into the Korean Peninsula peace process, while also making attempts to improve inter-Korean relations through feasible measures and facilitate negotiations between North Korea and the U.S. on denuclearization. In particular, by learning from the experiences of the summit meetings between North Korea and the U.S. held in Singapore and Hanoi, Seoul needs to pay attention to the fact that arrangements for the conclusion of a realizable and effective agreement before the actual meetings are important, instead of maintaining its current role facilitating negotiations between North Korea and the U.S. ©KINU 2020

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