

An Assessment of the Past 10 Years of South Korea Policy of the Kim Jong-un Regime

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The purpose of this paper is to evaluate South Korea's policy on North Korea over the past ten years under the Kim Jong-un regime. It is necessary to assess the regime's policies towards South Korea in connection with North Korea's national policy and security strategy as they are methods of achieving statewide and security-related objectives while addressing potential challenges. During the early phases of the Kim Jong-un regime, North Korea chose the Byungjin policy of simultaneously developing the economy and nuclear weapons. But in reality, North Korea's security strategy during this period was to focus on acquiring nuclear weapons. Given this, policies regarding South Korea were oriented towards cultivating an advantageous environment for, and managing obstacles against, the development of nuclear weapons. And as a result, North Korea's South Korea policy oscillated between aggressive and conciliatory approaches.

Meanwhile, North Korea changed its national policy to a policy of all-out concentration on growing the economy in April 2018. The regime has subsequently revised its security strategy in 4 different ways to pursue the new national strategy and adapt to the changing environment, and North Korea's South Korea policy during this latter phase has reflected such intentions. Specifically, North Korea adopted a conciliatory policy when it sought to foster favorable external conditions for economic development, while transitioning to a more aggressive stance based on the concept of prioritizing the U.S. over South Korea when opting for an isolationist breakthrough battle to grow its economy. North Korea later tried to conditionally improve inter-Korean relations when it attempted to preserve a peaceful environment, and proposed preconditions while displaying a conciliatory attitude when it tried to cultivate a more advantageous environment. As this illustrates, North Korea's South Korea policy has been subjected to, and has been used as

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a tool for, the state's national and security policy as determined by the situation and the changing environment. Consequently, the Kim Jong-un regime's policies on South Korea have been varied and makeshift, rather than being principled.

Keywords: South Korea policy, national strategy, security strategy, Byungjin, Kim Jong-un regime

I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to assess South Korea's policy on North Korea over the past ten years. But in order to do so, it is first necessary to understand the national strategy of North Korea as it not only includes, but also impacts, various aspects of state policy, including South Korea policy. North Korea's national strategy particularly emphasizes the economy and national security. This feature is not unique to the Kim Jong-un regime but is closer to a tradition in North Korea. The Kim Il-sung regime pursued the Byungjin policy of the economy and national security, while the Kim Jong-il regime emphasized military policy. The Kim Jong-un regime began with the Byungjin policy of developing the economy as well as completing its nuclear arsenal, then changed it to focus on economic policy. In addition, the Kim Jong-un regime has subjected South Korea policy to the achievement of goals promoted by its national strategy. In particular, the South Korea policy of North Korea has been used as a tool to foster favorable conditions for national policy and manage challenges.¹ Based on these observations, this article will first examine North Korea's national strategy by broadly distinguishing between the initial Byungjin policy of developing the economy and completing its nuclear arsenal and the subsequent policy of all-out concentration on growing the economy.

Next, the article analyzes the security strategies that have been pursued by North Korea in order to achieve its national strategy. Using this framework reveals how the security strategy of all-out concentration on completing the nuclear arsenal was pursued during the Byungjin policy phase of the Kim Jong-un regime. Meanwhile, its security strategy changed during the period in which North Korea pursued its policy of all-out concentration on growing the economy in the following order: cultivating

1 Park (2021) also assessed North Korea's South Korea policy from a similar perspective. Hyeong Jung Park, "10 Years of the Kim Jong-un Regime – On South Korea Policy (in Korean)," *proceedings for the academic conference co-hosted by the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) and the Future Convergence Research Institute*, Changwon University (2021), p. 19.

a favorable external environment, engaging in an isolationist breakthrough battle, preserving a peaceful environment, and fostering an advantageous environment. Based on this classification, the article then describes how South Korea policy has been related to each of these changes to North Korea's security strategy. During the phase of all-out concentration on the development of nuclear weapons, North Korea adopted a dual strategy of both aggressive and conciliatory attitudes vis-à-vis South Korea. North Korea subsequently adopted a conciliatory policy when it sought to foster favorable external conditions for economic development, while transitioning to a more aggressive stance based on the concept of prioritizing the U.S. over South Korea when opting for an isolationist breakthrough battle to grow its economy. Furthermore, North Korea adopted the principle of conditionally improving inter-Korean relations when it attempted to preserve a peaceful environment, and has proposed preconditions while displaying a conciliatory attitude as it tries to cultivate a more advantageous environment. This article seeks to analyze the Kim Jong-un regime's official statements and actions towards South Korea over the past 10 years chronologically using this framework.

II. The Byungjin Policy of Simultaneous Economic Growth and Development of Nuclear Power and South Korea Policy

1. The Situation Early in the Kim Jong-un Regime and the Byungjin Policy of Simultaneous Economic Growth and Development of Nuclear Power.

The sudden death of Kim Jong-il on December 17, 2011 left complete development of nuclear weapons as a dying wish for Kim Jong-un and a path-dependent restriction on his governance. Kim Jong-il appears to have planned to announce the completion of North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and the nation's "entry into the club of strong countries" in 2012 which marked the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth. Based on this foundation, the task of achieving economic development which would enable North Korea to "capture the highest rank among strong countries"

would be passed on to his successor Kim Jong-un. But the untimely death of Kim Jong-il meant that Kim Jong-un would inherit an incomplete project as his own. Such path dependence was inevitable and not a matter of choice. Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un also needed to quickly stabilize his power and secure the legitimacy of his rule. The trajectory of history alone was insufficient in addressing these needs, which meant that Kim Jong-un needed to demonstrate his own style of leadership that differed from his predecessors. To this end, Kim Jong-un proclaimed that his own path forward would be the 'path of socialism' by announcing the theses of "the path of Juche, Sungun, and socialism" in 2013.

The issues of path dependence created by hereditary succession were solved through the paths of Juche and Songun as Kim il-sung-ism/Kim Jong-il-ism was established as the guiding ideology during the 4th meeting of representatives of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in 2012. Furthermore, Kim Jong-un made the people-first principle the official objective of the path of socialism by personally stating in 2014 that the "essence of Kim il-sung-ism/Kim Jong-il-ism is the people-first principle." Through these steps, the direction decided by the new regime became the people-first principle. And through a combination of these competing pressures, the Byungjin policy of simultaneous economic growth and development of nuclear weapons was declared at a plenary meeting of the WPK in March 2013. Economic development reflected the new direction proposed by the Kim Jong-un regime while nuclear weapons were the result of path dependence.

The security-related contents and implications of the Byungjin policy were as follows. First, completion of the nuclear arsenal was defined as a necessary condition both at home and abroad for the growth of the economy and the betterment of living conditions.² North Korea emphasized how the

2 "The struggle to develop the economy and improve the lives of the people can successfully proceed only when it is guaranteed with strong military power and a nuclear arsenal," statements by Kim Jong-un at a Plenary Meeting of the Party Central Committee of the WPK, March 31, 2013.

reduction in military spending could be reallocated to improving everyday lives, as well as how advancements in the atomic energy sector would be used to resolve the nation's energy problems. Furthermore, Kim Jong-un also stated during the plenary meeting in March that "the Byungjin policy is superior because it allows to focus on economic development and improving people's lives since it decidedly strengthens the ability to deter and defend without additional increases to military spending." Second, North Korea defined the completion of its nuclear arsenal as a matter of self-defense against sanctions and pressure by the U.S. that obstructed the nation's efforts to improve its economy and the lives of the people. North Korea claimed that "the U.S. and its puppets are forcing us into an arms race in order to cause difficulties in our struggle to construct an economically strong country and improve the lives of the people." The North Korean regime also relied on the theory of nuclear peace and the belief that nuclear states are not invaded. As shown above, Kim Jong-un argued that the development of nuclear weapons was a necessary condition for economic growth.

In this regard, Kim Jong-un ordered the active promotion of an 'advantageous external environment' necessary for the pursuit of the Byungjin policy. North Korea sought to do so by responding to international sanctions and isolation by diversifying its foreign trade relations. Politically, North Korea searched for friendly nations through diplomatic activities as a proud and strong nuclear state, emphasized that it would actively contribute to regional and global peace and security as a responsible nuclear state, and claimed that it would faithfully carry out its duties regarding nonproliferation and assist denuclearization around the world. But it was structurally impossible for such efforts to foster an advantageous external environment to coexist with the Byungjin policy.

In essence, the Byungjin policy was a strategy that focused on cultivating a security environment in which North Korea could devote all its attention to economic development but, in reality, can be regarded as a policy of all-out concentration on the completion of its nuclear arsenal. As a matter of fact, North Korea conducted three of its six nuclear tests

during the period between when the Byungjin policy was announced and November 2017 when the completion of the nuclear program was declared. North Korea also test-launched 60 ballistic missiles from 2014 to 2017; 13 missiles were launched in 2014, two in 2015, 24 in 2016, and 21 missiles tested through 16 launches in 2017.³ It seems that North Korea had intended the Byungjin policy to contribute to the completion of nuclear weapons from the beginning. While economic development comes first in the official title of the Byungjin policy, its implementation clearly prioritizes nuclear weapons. And during the 3rd plenary meeting of the 7th term of the Party Central Committee of the WPK in April 2018, North Korea announced the completion of the Byungjin policy based on its nuclear weapons alone.

Additionally, obtaining and securing the support of the military during the early stages of the Kim Jong-un regime were crucial. The need to quickly stabilize the political uncertainty precipitated by the sudden death of Kim Jong-il required Kim Jong-un to draw the military, a potential 'double-edged sword,' to his power base.⁴ To achieve this immediate goal, Kim Jong-un implemented measures to enhance the Party's control over the military on one hand, while highly valuing the role of the military in the task of 'strengthening independent national security' on the other. For example, the regime purged former Chief of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army (KPA) Ri Yong-ho in July 2012, appointed Choe Ryong-hae as director of the KPA General Political Bureau, and transferred foreign currency-earning operations monopolized by the military to the Cabinet to increase the Party's control of the military. Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un had to accept structural constraints that prohibited his regime from abandoning the Sungun Revolutionary policy of the past as a political compromise, despite having chosen the 'path of socialism' with its

3 Seong-ryoul Cho, presentation, the General Meeting of the Peace and Development Subcommittee of the Peaceful Unification Advisory Council (PUAC), March 3, 2021. (in Korean)

4 Geedong Lee, "The Party Leadership and Control Over the Military During the Kim Jong-un Period (in Korean)," *INSS Strategy Report* 140 (2021).

emphasis on revitalizing the economy and improving the lives of the people as its overall direction. North Korea also faced policy constraints due to the need to respond aggressively to the 'strategic patience' of the Obama administration and its policy of non-engagement while the U.S. maintained sanctions and pressure.⁵ Simply put, Kim Jong-un strategically adopted the Byungjin policy of economic development and development of nuclear weapons as the Party's policy to consolidate his regime.

2. The Policy of All-out Concentration on Development of Nuclear Power and Dual-sided Policy towards South Korea

The South Korea policy on North Korea during the initial period of the Byungjin policy, simultaneously developing the economy and nuclear weapons, was subjugated to the all-out concentration on the development of nuclear weapons and was used as a tool to achieve this goal. Therefore, North Korea's South Korea policy became dual-sided as it oscillated from aggressive to conciliatory approaches based on the circumstances at hand.

1) Aggressive approach

Immediately after the beginning of the Kim Jong-un regime, North Korea revealed its intent to initiate a 'war of national unification' as soon as possible using its nuclear arsenal and conventional weapons. In response to joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises in February 2012, North Korea declared a 'struggle of all-out war' against South Korea while also mentioning 'fierce retaliatory strikes.' North Korea subsequently launched the 'Kwangmyongsong-3' missile in December 2012 and followed up its third nuclear test conducted in February 2013 by thoroughly

5 "There is now a giant obstacle before our nation that, based on our independent ability to deter war, had intended to concentrate our efforts to economic development in order to ensure that our people no longer need to tighten their belts and enjoy the prosperity of socialism." Statements by Kim Jong-un at a Plenary Meeting of the Party Central Committee of the WPK in March, *Rodong Sinmun*, March 31, 2013.

heightening military tensions between March and April. Amidst these circumstances, North Korea decided to close down the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Through a statement by the head of the United Front Department Kim Yang-gon, North Korea blamed disrespect to their 'highest dignity' by South Korean officials and the media for the closure, and additionally claimed that the Complex benefitted South Korea more than it did North Korea economically.⁶ It seems that North Korea had no choice but to respond firmly against any actions that appeared to disrespect their 'highest dignity' since it was a period during which the Kim Jong-un regime prioritized the security of the regime more than anything else.

The Dresden speech by President Park Geun-hye on March 28, 2014, caused North Korea to worsen inter-Korean relations even further. The symbolic nature of the location of the speech being in the former East Germany side and President Park's mentioning of malnutrition among pregnant women and children in North Korea and the issue of North Korean defectors provoked North Korea.⁷ Strained inter-Korean relations ensued, with North Korea harshly criticizing President Park and other South Korean officials. This can be interpreted as not only a response to the Park administration's remarks about the regime, but also as an effort to prevent public unrest that might have occurred due to weakening domestic support and the international community's denunciation of the regime as a result of the execution of Kim Jong-un's uncle and former director of the Administration Department of the WPK Jang Song Thaek in December 2013.

6 "The confrontational-frenzied apostles of South Korea have continued to issue statements denigrating our highest dignity by mentioning 'monetary lifelines,' 'detainment,' or 'hostages,' and Minister of National Defense Kim Kwan-jin has also revealed his incendiary intent to include U.S. special forces in the issue of the Kaesong Industrial Complex by speaking of 'hostage rescue' operations." "On the Serious Decision Regarding the Situation Involving the Kaesong Industrial Complex (in Korean)," *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)*, April 8, 2013.

7 "What is absurd is how the leader of South Korea has feigned concern for our pregnant women and children by erroneously distorting our conditions by speaking of an economic crisis or hunger," *Rodong Sinmun*, April 1, 2014.

The tension between the two Koreas reached its peak following the wooden mine incident in the demilitarized zone (DMZ) in August 2015. The Park administration responded by resuming loudspeaker broadcasts. In retaliation, North Korea threatened to target the speakers and conducted artillery strikes against South Korean territory on the western front on August 20. Retaliatory fire by South Korea caused Kim Jong-un to declare a 'quasi-state of war' on the front lines. This episode showed how unplanned military clashes between the two Koreas could occur at any moment and how it might potentially escalate into an all-out war. Above all, it clearly demonstrated how North Korea was particularly sensitive to the resumption of loudspeaker broadcasts. Protecting the 'highest dignity' was a matter of life and death for North Korean forces and an issue that they were willing to risk war over.

North Korea would conduct its fourth nuclear test on January 6, 2016, and consequently test-launch the 'Kwangmyongsong-4' missile on February 7. The Park administration decided to withdraw operations from the Kaesong Industrial Complex to which North Korea reacted by closing it completely. After those measures and before North Korea declared the completion of its nuclear arsenal, all openings to possible dialogue between the two Koreas remained closed as North Korea conducted two additional nuclear tests and test-launched several missiles, including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

2) Conciliatory Approach

North Korea began to shift to a conciliatory South Korea policy following the visit to China and meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping by the director of the KPA General Political Bureau Choe Ryong-hae in May 2013. It appears that director Choe's visit was pursued by North Korea as its diplomatic isolation deepened and its economic situation worsened with China's active participation in the international sanctions regime. In particular, North Korea demonstrated extreme restraint in not criticizing South Korea during the Ulchi-Freedom Guardian joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises in August 2013. Meanwhile, the visit to North Korea and

meeting with Kim Jong-un by Hyundai Group Chairwoman Hyun Jeong-eun opened the doors to a possible reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Subsequently, a statement by the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland authorized by Kim Jong-un guaranteed the normal operation of the Complex on August 7, and the Complex was reopened on August 14 after the 7th working-level meeting on the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Furthermore, inter-Korean family reunions were held from February 20 to 25, 2014, at Mount Kumgang. This round of family reunions was particularly meaningful as it coincided with U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises. It appears that North Korea was highly hopeful for the resumption of tourism to Mount Kumgang in return for the family reunions. Another noteworthy aspect was the significant role personally played by Kim Jong-un during this process.⁸

North Korea announced its proposal for a federal confederation on July 7, 2014 through a statement issued by the government. The proposal for a federal confederation was derived from common elements in South Korea's concept of confederation that was based on the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration of 2000 on the one hand and North Korea's formula for a loose form of federation on the other. The proposal can be interpreted as North Korea's acceptance of South Korea's proposal for a confederation since the federal confederation system acknowledges a two-state system while the lower-level plan for a federation assumes a one-state system. It appears North Korea proposed this plan for a federal confederation in response to talks of unification through absorption that were discussed under the Park administration at the time.

Later, North Korea would dispatch a high-level delegation that included the new director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA Hwang Pyong-so, along with secretaries of the WPK Choe Ryong-hae and Kim

8 Seong-chang Cheong, "Assessing 10 Years of the Kim Jong-un Regime's South Korea Policy and Anticipating the Future (in Korean)," *proceedings from the international webinar co-hosted by the Institute for Far Eastern Studies (IFES) and Freidrich Haumann Foundation (FHF)*, "North Korea's Past Decade under Kim Jong-un's Rule and What the Future Holds," (2021) pp. 224-225.

Yang-gon, to attend the closing ceremony of the Incheon Asian Games on October 4, 2014. The delegation met with the South Korean National Security Advisor Kim Kwan-jin and agreed to hold a second round of high-level talks during their visit. This meeting failed to occur, however, due to the issue of propaganda leaflets sent from South Korea. This was a clear example of North Korea using inter-Korean relations to establish and consolidate the Kim Jong-un regime. It can be speculated that Kim Jong-un had internal reasons for why it had to use an international sporting event to deliver a conciliatory message, even though it still remains unclear what the regime had sought to achieve by urgently sending three of its most powerful officials to 'enemy territory.'

Tense inter-Korean relations following the wooden mine incident in August 2015 began to transition into a negotiation phase. High-level talks were held at the Peace House in Panmunjom for 3 days from August 22 to 24. In attendance were South Korea's National Security Advisor and Minister of National Unification and North Korea's director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA and head of the United Front Department. Through this meeting, the two sides issued a joint press release that included an early hosting of inter-Korean governmental meetings, an expression of regret by North Korea regarding the wooden mine incident, suspension of loudspeaker broadcasts by South Korea, lifting of the quasi-state of war by North Korea, family reunions at around *Chuseok*, and revitalizing inter-Korean civilian exchanges. Inter-Korean governmental meetings were subsequently held on December 11-12, 2015, at the Kaesong Industrial Complex, but ultimately failed due to North Korea's demands of resuming tourism to Mount Kungang in exchange for the family reunion. Following this meeting, inter-Korean relations remained frozen until North Korea's participation in the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.

III. Policy of All-out Concentration on Growing the Economy and South Korea Policy

1. Completion of Nuclear Development, Conclusion of the Byungjin Policy, and the Adoption of the Policy of All-out Concentration on Growing the Economy

North Korea conducted three nuclear tests and countless test launches of various types of ballistic missiles from early 2016 to November 2017. As a result, North Korea faced five UN Security Council resolutions on sanctions targeting the regime, and inter-Korean relations, as well as North Korea's external relations with other countries, became practically non-existent. Regarding North Korea's test launch of the 'Hwasong-15' ballistic missile on November 29, 2017, which later became the foundation for the regime's declaration of the completion of its nuclear arsenal, there were understandable doubts about how it might have been incomplete technology-wise. Doubts remain to this day about how the test launch failed to demonstrate reentry capabilities and precision strike technology, two core technological components of ICBMs, even though North Korea demonstrated that their missiles had the range to strike the U.S. mainland. This is due to how North Korea chose the vertical-angle launch method rather than a normal-angle launch.

And while there are various explanations for the reasons and context in which North Korea prematurely declared the completion of its nuclear arsenal, the general consensus is that the goal was to transition to its policy of all-out concentration on growing the economy after declaring its completion of nuclear development. Key conditions needed to be satisfied for the regime to focus all its efforts on economic development. One was to foster a favorable external environment for economic development by not only suspending the nuclear program but also showing that it had been improved. The other was to secure firm measures for its survival so that there weren't any gaps in the country's national security posture due to denuclearization. These two conditions became the standard on which North Korea's security policy was crafted, and they subsequently led to three distinct phases. First was the period of cultivating a favorable

external environment. This was followed by the period of maintaining a peaceful environment. The last was fostering an advantageous external environment. North Korea maintained its policy of all-out concentration on growing the economy at the 8th Party congress of the WPK, and the success and failure of its new five-year national economic development plan announced at the Party congress became an additional criterion for North Korea's security policy.

2. Policy of All-out Concentration on Growing the Economy and South Korea Policy

1) Fostering a Favorable Environment for Economic Development and Conciliatory South Korea Policy

Soon after Kim Jong-un conveyed a conciliatory message to South Korea and the international community through his 2018 new year's statement, North Korea confirmed its intent to pursue progressive foreign policy in the form of announcing its decision to participate in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics and agreeing to the inter-Korean summit meeting on April 27 as well as the U.S.-North Korea summit meeting on June 12. These actions were an extension of the 3rd plenary meeting of the Party Central Committee of the 7th term of the WPK held on April 20, 2018, at which both the 'victory of the Byungjin policy' based on the completion of the 'weaponization of nuclear weapons' had been declared and the policy of all-out concentration on developing the economy announced. The security-related strategic implications of the decisions made at this particular meeting were as follows. First, among the three written- decisions adopted at the meeting, the one titled, "Regarding the Declaration of the Great Victory of the Byungjin Policy of Simultaneously Developing the Economy and Nuclear Weapons" included 6 decisions.⁹

9 ■ Completed weaponization of nuclear weapons through nuclear tests, miniaturization, light weight, and the development of delivery systems for nuclear warheads, ■ Suspend nuclear tests and test-launches of ICBMs after April 21, 2018 and dismantle the nuclear testing site in the northern region, ■ Suspend nuclear tests as part of the global nuclear disarmament process, ■ Non-use

Meanwhile, the second written-decision titled "To Concentrate All-out Efforts to Build a Socialist Economy that Meets the Demands of a Higher Stage of Revolutionary Progress" included 4 decisions.¹⁰ The preemptive and voluntary expression of North Korea's intent to freeze nuclear development through measures such as suspending nuclear and ICBM testing and dismantling nuclear test sites reflected the desire to cultivate a favorable external environment. North Korea also called for nuclear disarmament, non-use, non-transfer, and nonproliferation. These statements have resulted in suspicions that North Korea might seek only a temporary freeze of its nuclear program while enjoying its status as a nuclear state and pursue incomplete denuclearization. There are also concerns that North Korea is intentionally limiting its remarks to future nuclear weapons without referring to its past and current nuclear capabilities.¹¹

While pursuing its Byungjin policy, North Korea had emphasized 'cultivating an advantageous external environment.' But at the 3rd plenary meeting of the Party Central Committee of the 7th term of the WPK, fostering a favorable external environment through 'ties and dialogue with the international community' was stressed, as an 'advantageous environment' had already been created with the completion of its nuclear arsenal. While the Byungjin policy was being pursued, the term 'advantageous' referred to the diversification of trade relations and more lively diplomatic

of nuclear weapons and the non-transfer of nuclear weapons and technology under the condition that there are no nuclear threats or provocations, ■ Connecting to and conversing with the international community to build a socialist economy.

10 ■ Focus all of the system's projects on the building of a socialist economy, ■ Strengthen the role of the Party, workers' associations, government organs, legal organs, and the military to the pursuit of the first goal, ■ Order Party organs and other political organizations to comprehensively oversee and guide the implementation of the decisions made at the plenary meeting, ■ Demand that the committees of the Supreme People's Assembly and the Cabinet undertake legal, administrative, and practical measures for the implementation of decisions made at the plenary meeting.

11 Hyojong Song, "Assessing the Implications of the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 7th Term of the WPK(in Korean)," *KIDA Weekly Forum* 1716(18-15)(2018).

activities, but the meaning had changed to the completion of nuclear development by the plenary meeting. This shift appears to have been intended to highlight the importance of cultivating a favorable external environment.

Strategic considerations appear to have mattered greatly in North Korea's decision to first declare the early but partial completion of its nuclear program, and then to change its policies in order to cultivate a favorable external environment for economic development. North Korea appears to have perceived the completion of its nuclear arsenal as a task that it absolutely needed to complete for regime survival and national security, to become a military power and secure deterrence against nuclear war, despite anticipating stronger sanctions for its nuclear tests and ICBM test-launches. Declaring the early but partial completion of its nuclear program would allow North Korea to quickly change the direction of its policy to alternative domestic and foreign policy, to concentrate on economic development and foster a favorable external environment. Lastly, North Korea seems to have concluded that abandoning key parts of its nuclear program in the form of suspending operations and dismantling the Yongbyon nuclear facility would create momentum for economic growth.

Meanwhile, the strategic interests of North Korea coincided with the Moon administration's active invitations to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, which South Korea had defined as the peace Olympics. This meant that North Korea likely considered the Games as a way to change the overall situation and declared the completion of its nuclear arsenal early with the timing of the Olympics in mind.

North Korea began to cooperate with the engagement policies of South Korea and the U.S. at this time. In his 2018 New Year's statement, Kim Jong-un revealed his desire to improve inter-Korean relations by expressing the nation's intent to participate in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.¹² A high-level delegation which included 1st Deputy Director of the WPK Kim Yo-jong and President of the Presidium of the Supreme

People's Assembly Kim Yong-nam attended the opening ceremony of the Pyeongchang Games, and Kim Yo-jong conveyed Kim Jong-un's invitation to Pyongyang to President Moon Jae-in. As a result, a South Korean delegation which was headed by director of the National Security Office Chung Eui-yong and included director of the National Intelligence Service Suh Hoon visited North Korea from March 5 to 6, 2018, and an agreement on hosting an inter-Korean summit meeting in late April was reached during their visit. This led to the historic Panmunjom inter-Korean summit meeting on April 27, 2018.

The Panmunjom Declaration included initiatives such as ■ comprehensive and epochal improvement and development in inter-Korean relations, ■ removal of the danger of war, ■ cooperation to build a permanent and stable peace regime on the Korean peninsula, ■ declaring the end of the Korean War within the year, and ■ complete denuclearization on the Korean peninsula. On May 26, a subsequent inter-Korean summit meeting was held in the northern areas of Panmunjom at a working-level in preparation for the first U.S.-North Korea summit scheduled for June 12. After the Singapore Agreement was reached through the U.S.-North Korea summit talks, the two Koreas held the third inter-Korean summit meeting in Pyongyang from September 18-20. This meeting resulted in the September 19 Pyongyang Joint Declaration and the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain or the Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA). The Pyongyang Joint Declaration included important agreements on specific measures to implement the Panmunjom Declaration, as well as other measures such as the permanent dismantlement of North Korea's Dongchang-ri missile test site and Yongbyon nuclear facilities. Meanwhile, the CMA included basic measures for operational arms control such as creating buffer zones on land, at sea, and in the air to eliminate the threat of war and build mutual trust in order to alleviate hostilities in the relationship. Kim Jong-un would continue his regime's conciliatory attitude towards South Korea in 2019.

12 "New Year's Statement by Kim Jong-un," *Rodong Sinmun*, January 1, 2018.

In his New Year's statement, Kim Jong-un highly valued the progress in inter-Korean relations made the previous year by describing 2018 as a 'vibrant year' and a 'year during which inter-Korean relations has entered an entirely new phase.'

In sum, North Korea sought to improve inter-Korean relations from the perspective of cultivating a favorable external environment to concentrate all its efforts on economic development during this period. North Korea's South Korea policy was pursued by recognizing South Korea's role as a mediator as the regime tried to use inter-Korean relations as a stepping stone for improved bilateral relations with the U.S.

2) Isolationist Strategy of Engaging in a Head-on Breakthrough Battle for Economic Development and Aggressive Strategy on South Korea based on Prioritizing the U.S. over South Korea

The U.S. and North Korea hosted their second bilateral summit meeting in Hanoi from February 27 to 28, 2019. But despite South Korea's active attempts at mediation, the two sides failed to reach a deal due to disagreements on the degree to which nuclear facilities were to be dismantled and the extent to which sanctions would be lifted. Following the Hanoi summit, North Korea began to either refuse or reject South Korea's role as a facilitator. During a press conference in Pyongyang on March 15, 2019, First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Choe Son-hui noted that "South Korea is a player, not a mediator." And on April 12, 2019, Kim Jong-un demanded that South Korea "should not try to be a meddling mediator or facilitator but instead act as an involved Party that represents the interests of the people" during his administrative speech to the 1st meeting of the 14th term of the Supreme People's Assembly. Kim Jong-un further denounced the dependent attitude of South Korea on the U.S., claiming that "neither progress in inter-Korean relations nor peace and prosperity can be expected without fundamentally eliminating America's antiquated arrogance and hostile policies."

At the same time, however, Kim Jong-un also mentioned his willingness

to meet if the U.S. changed its attitude during his administrative speech, and stated that his regime would be waiting for a positive response. Following this statement, North Korea clearly changed its policy to prioritize the U.S. over South Korea, to exclude South Korea from the process and reach a bargain with the U.S. directly. On June 27, 2019, the director-general of the department of U.S. affairs of North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Kwon Jong-gun stated through a statement that "talks between the U.S. and North Korea are an issue that does not involve the South Korean government." He further claimed that "we can use direct lines of communication with the U.S. if we have something to discuss, and we will never go through South Korea since we can sit directly with the U.S. if negotiations resume." Later, North Korea fiercely denounced the South Korean government regarding joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises through statements by the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on August 6 and the spokesperson for the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland on August 16.¹³

As the U.S. refused to withdraw hostile policies which North Korea had stated as the precondition for the resumption of talks, North Korea declared its policy of 'engaging in a head-on breakthrough battle' based on the core principles of self-reliance and strengthening capabilities internally through the 5th plenary meeting of the 7th term of the Party Central Committee in late December 2019. This was despite the surprising trilateral summit meeting at Panmunjom on June 30 and the working-level talks between the U.S. and North Korea in Stockholm on October 4-5. Reporting to the plenary meeting, Kim Jong-un emphasized "obtaining victory in the head-on breakthrough battle through strong political, diplomatic, and military offensives," and expressed the regime's intent to continue enhancing military capabilities through "the development of strategic weapons systems that will make our military and technological strengths inevitable."

13 Seong-chang Cheong, "Assessing 10 Years of the Kim Jong-un Regime's South Korea Policy and Anticipating the Future (in Korean)," *proceedings from the international webinar co-hosted by the Institute for Far Eastern Studies (IFES) and Freidrich Haumann Foundation (FHF)* (2021), pp. 230-231.

The strategy of a head-on breakthrough battle can be interpreted as a North Korean-style isolationist policy to further strengthen its capabilities internally based on the perception that a prolonged stalemate in bilateral relations with the U.S. was unavoidable.

North Korea policy vis-à-vis South Korea became visibly more aggressive after the principle of prioritizing the U.S. over South Korea and the strategy of a head-on breakthrough battle were adopted. Beginning in 2020, North Korea began to criticize the sending of propaganda leaflets by nongovernmental organizations in South Korea. In her statement on June 4, 1st Deputy Director of the WPK Kim Yo-jong denounced the Moon administration for abetting the sending of leaflets. And at a review meeting of departments related to South Korea held on June 8, North Korea subsequently decided to transform all policies towards South Korea into 'adversarial policies' and to terminate all channels of communications between the two Koreas as of noon on June 9. These measures culminated with the destruction of the inter-Korean Liaison Office on June 16.

But despite these escalatory measures, North Korea's aggressive stance towards South Korea began to ease as Kim Jong-un postponed the General Staff of the KPA's plans for military action against North Korea proposed during a meeting of the Party Central Military Commission. Kim Jong-un would follow this up with a conciliatory message in his statement at the military parade commemorating the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the WPK on October 10, 2020, during which he stated that he "hoped for the day where the two Koreas hold hands once more." And in response to the shooting of a South Korean public servant in the West Sea that occurred on September 22, 2020, Kim Jong-un took the unprecedented step of apologizing to South Korea "for giving President Moon Jae-in and the people of South Korea a huge sense of disappointment" through a notice issued in the name of the United Front Department.

3) Preserving a Peaceful External Environment and the Principle of Conditionally Improving Inter-Korean Relations

North Korea held its 8th Party congress of the WPK in the early days of 2021 at which the policy of all-out concentration on growing the economy and the strategy of head-on breakthrough battle were reaffirmed. In addition, North Korea also proposed the preservation of a peaceful external environment as a part of its security policy.¹⁴ Preserving a peaceful external environment differs from North Korea's strategy to cultivate an advantageous external environment by improving relations with the U.S.¹⁵ Preserving a peaceful environment refers to a security strategy that seeks to focus on economic growth based on the peaceful conditions secured through nuclear deterrence and stronger military capabilities, without hopes of improved relations with the U.S.

Based on this security strategy, Kim Jong-un noted during the review of national policies at the 8th Party congress of the WPK that inter-Korean relations had now returned to the state of affairs before the Panmunjom Declaration. He also proposed three principles on inter-Korean relations;

- to maintain the position and stance on solving fundamental problems

14 During his review of projects at the 8th Party congress of the WPK, Kim Jong-un described the principle of preserving a peaceful environment as the following: "The people's military, under the guidance of the Party, has faithfully fulfilled its revolutionary responsibilities by accomplishing great achievements and miracles on the two fronts of protecting the fatherland and constructing socialism. It has soundly defended the nation's land, air, and sea while also firmly defeating threats by enemies by being alert and ready to mobilize over the past five years that have been important and tense, thereby preserving a peaceful environment for the construction of socialism." Furthermore, Kim Jong-un "ordered the revolutionary position of continuing to strengthen national security, which is the basis of the state's survival and a trustworthy guarantee of the dignity and safety of the country and its people as well as the preservation of peace."

15 During his review of projects at the 8th Party congress of the WPK, Kim Jong-un stated that "while it is true that we need an advantageous external environment for the construction of our economy, we cannot sell our dignity which we have defended with our lives for the hope of a fancy transformation."

first, ■ to cease all hostile activities against the opponent, and ■ to emphasize and faithfully implement inter-Korean agreements. He further identified measures such as the import of advanced military equipment and the conduct of joint military exercises that went against the CMA on the one hand, and interest in non-fundamental issues such as cooperation on preventive measures against the pandemic, humanitarian assistance, and individual tourist projects on the other, as the two main reasons for worsening inter-Korean relations. North Korea further claimed, ■ that a new path for better inter-Korean relations based on firm trust and conciliation may be discovered if abnormal activities of obstructing unification are thoroughly managed and their causes eliminated, ■ that the restoration and rehabilitation of inter-Korean relations are solely dependent on the attitude of South Korea and that it would reap what it sowed, ■ that there would be no more unilateral gestures of kindness towards South Korea and that the regime would only respond to the extent that justified demands are met and agreements kept, and ■ that the Spring on the Korean peninsula from three years ago could return depending on the attitude of the Korean government.

After the 8th Party congress, North Korea concentrated on internal affairs, encouraging the implementation of decisions made by the Party. With the intent to encourage the development of the economy, North Korea not only stressed the achievements made during the first year of the new five-year national economic development plan but also held the 2nd plenary meeting of the Party Central Committee to review the year's economic plans and also hosted a party-wide educational meeting led by Kim Jong-un. In terms of reorganizing the system, North Korea newly established the Discipline Investigation Department, the Department of Justice for social control, and the Ministry of Political Guidance of the Military to strengthen control of the military. An uncompromising struggle against, and eradication of, anti-socialist and non-socialist occurrences were also called for at both the 8th Party congress and the cell secretaries' meeting of the WPK.

Within this context, North Korea displayed a sensitive but cautious

attitude regarding the joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises conducted in early 2021. Through her statement on March 16, 2021, 1st Deputy Director of the WPK Kim Yo-jong criticized the exercises and mentioned the possibility of proportional reciprocal measures. Kim Yo-jong claimed that "war exercises and dialogue, hostility and cooperation can never coexist," threatened the disbandment of the organizations for cooperation and dialogue such as the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland and the Mt. Kumgang International Tourism Bureau, and even suggested the possibility of the CMA being terminated depending on the behavior of South Korea. It appears that North Korea could not ignore the joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises that the regime had defined as a fundamental problem at the 8th Party congress, even though the regime was focused on internal affairs. When the joint military exercises began, North Korea responded with low-level provocations by test-launching a cruise missile on March 21 and a ballistic missile on March 25. It seems that North Korea had considered how higher-level provocations could worsen the situation by causing additional sanctions. Moreover, from the perspective of proportionality, it could have taken into account how the size of the military exercises had been reduced, despite a nuclear test or a test-launch of an ICBM being more conventional reactions. This may have also been the result of North Korea's intent not to push inter-Korean relations to the brink. The fact that Kim yo-jong's statement did not include the prospect of terminating the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration or the September 19 Pyongyang Joint Declaration supports this interpretation. Lastly, North Korea's response may have reflected how North Korean officials in charge of South Korea policy were politically forced to respond to the joint military exercises that they had demanded be suspended on several occasions.

North Korea has demanded the U.S. withdraw its hostile policies against the regime but has not specified what this entails. This can be perceived as an effort to secure strategic flexibility by maintaining ambiguity. North Korea has previously listed preventing additional sanctions, suspending joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises, and suspending the deployment of strategic military assets as hostile policies

by the U.S. during working-level meetings held in Stockholm in October 2019. However, it is possible that other policies may be added to the list, such as the suspension of pressure regarding human rights in North Korea, depending on the circumstances, since the list above was limited to preconditions for the working-level meetings. Revealing the entire list of measures included in what North Korea refers to as hostile policies against the regime would limit strategic flexibility as the regime would only be able to apply its principle of 'responding to goodwill with goodwill' if and when every aspect that it has mentioned is satisfied. Put differently, North Korea appears to be maintaining strategic flexibility by remaining vague about hostile policies by the U.S even when only a few of its conditions have been met.

North Korea has expressed its intent to take the initiative in inter-Korean relations using its military capabilities, as it has stated that it would "defend security and peace on the Korean peninsula, and also quicken unification, through its strong military power." This reveals that North Korea will hold South Korea's security hostage in its relationship with the U.S. on the one hand, while also trying to leverage military hegemony in its South Korea policy by demanding rewards for maintaining peace and stability in inter-Korean relations on the other. And while it has suggested a return of the 'Spring of 2018,' it nevertheless appears to be pressuring South Korea to change its stance while also diluting its unilateral approach by making the improvement of inter-Korean relations conditional on the "attitude of the South Korean government."

4) Cultivating an Advantageous External Environment for Economic Development and Proposing Preconditions under a Conciliatory South Korea Policy

North Korea held the 3rd plenary meeting of the Party Central Committee of the 8th term of the WPK from June 16 to 19, 2021, six months after the 8th Party congress. At this meeting, Kim Jong-un mentioned the possibility of dialogue by stating that North Korea needed to "be prepared for both dialogue and confrontation," while also announcing its security

strategy of actively trying to cultivate an advantageous external environment for the all-out concentration on economic development. Such a strategy may be, first, considered as a response to the Biden administration's North Korea policy that is based on diplomatic engagement with North Korea. Second, it may also be viewed as a measure to overcome the limitations of North Korea's new five-year national economic development plan based on the principle of self-sufficiency as it was announced at a time when the achievements of the plan for the first half of 2021 were reviewed.

North Korea claimed that it would take the initiative on fostering an advantageous environment for economic development, which may be interpreted as intent to escape its isolationist stance. Taking the initiative may also refer to how the regime will actively respond to the Biden administration's policies once they are implemented, and how it seeks to actively attempt to import materials and resources necessary for economic growth from South Korea and other countries. In particular, this shift in policy seems to reflect concerns about a lack of progress achieved in the five-year national economic development plan due to the prolonged closure of its borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To begin, North Korea restored the lines of inter-Korean communication on July 27, 2021. This represented an easing of North Korea's principles for improving inter-Korean relations stated during the 8th Party congress given how neither the joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises nor increases to military spending, two fundamental issues raised by North Korea, had been resolved. This indicates that North Korea's reference to initiative-taking might be related to its South Korea policy. But in her statements on August 1 and August 10, 1st Deputy Director of the WPK Kim Yo-jong denounced the joint military exercises and temporarily closed the channels of communication. They were restored on October 4 after Kim Jong-un had promised to do so during his administrative speech to the Supreme Assembly on September 24.

When President Moon proposed the declaration of the end of the Korean War during his keynote speech to the UN General Assembly on September 21, North Korea responded positively to the proposal but also

offered several preconditions for the improvement of inter-Korean relations. In her statement on September 24, Kim Yo-jong demanded guarantees of mutual respect as well as the withdrawal of hostile policies and double standards before a declaration of the end of the Korean War. North Korea's position was that while the declaration was itself "a positive measure," a declaration of the end of the Korean War while hostile policies against the regime remained was nothing more than an illusion and thus premature.¹⁶ North Korea would issue a statement the next day on September 25 expressing its intent to engage in constructive discussions for the restoration of inter-Korean relations and paths forward for the relationship, on the condition of careful rhetoric by the South Korean government and the suspension of hostile activities. The statement mentioned better communication between the two Koreas through the restoration of communication channels, declaration of the end of the Korean War, reconstruction of the inter-Korean Liaison Office, and a possible inter-Korean summit meeting.¹⁷ North Korea's stance on inter-Korean relations was confirmed as Kim Jong-un reiterated the preconditions proposed by Kim Yo-jong during this administrative speech to the Supreme Assembly on September 29.

There are a couple of aspects of North Korea's stance during this period that are noteworthy. North Korea has linked the declaration of the end of the Korean War with South Korea's suspension of its increases in military spending. North Korea has increased its level of criticism of South Korea's efforts to increase military spending through various mediums.

This is evidence of North Korea's sensitivity regarding South Korea's increased military spending, and a message to South Korea that it should either choose between more military spending or the declaration of the end of the Korean War. This appears to be based on three considerations.

16 "Statement by the 1st Deputy Director of the WPK Kim Yo-jong," *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA), September 24, 2021.

17 "Statement by the 1st Deputy Director of the WPK Kim Yo-jong," *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA), September 25, 2021.

First, North Korea may be concerned that it may lose the initiative in inter-Korean relations if the military balance, which North Korea believes is the only area in which it has the upper hand, considering the widening gap in overall state power between the two Koreas, shifts in South Korea's favor as it catches up or overtakes North Korea's military capabilities. Second, North Korea may also be worried about how the arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the 1980s caused the latter's economic difficulties and eventual collapse. While South Korea has been able to increase its military spending based on its massive economy, North Korea lacks the funds and resources to invest in strengthening its military. Third, the intensifying security dilemma precipitated by arms races inhibits the fostering of an advantageous external environment in which North Korea can concentrate all its efforts on growing the economy.

Despite these concerns, Kim Jong-un stressed the need to strengthen national defense at the Convention for National Defense Development on October 11, 2021. His speech emphasized ■ how double standards must be avoided since North Korea's efforts to strengthen its military is in response to the continued increases in military spending by the U.S. and South Korea, ■ how North Korea would make every effort necessary for peace on the Korean peninsula but would also not give up its right to self-defense, and ■ how successes in the military industry would be transferred to the people's economy. An interesting aspect from the speech was Kim Jong-un's mentioning that "our primary enemy is war itself, and not South Korea, the U.S., or any specific country or actor." This can be viewed as a message to South Korea and the U.S. not to treat North Korea as their enemy and to withdraw their hostile policies against the regime from the perspective of 'opening a new era of peace' as agreed upon in the Panmunjom Declaration or in the hopes of 'establishing new relations between the U.S. and North Korea' as stated in the Singapore Joint Agreement.¹⁸

18 Geedong Lee, "Kim Jong-un's Speech Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Establishment of the WPK and North Korea's Foreign Policy and South Korea Policy (in Korean)," *INSS Issue Brief* 215, October 14, 2021.

VI. Conclusion: Policy Implications

As discussed above, North Korea's policies vis-à-vis South Korea have largely been predicated on a security strategy that is subject to, and designed to realize, North Korea's overall national strategy. The following policy implications can be inferred based on this analysis.

First, North Korea's security strategy has adaptively reacted to changes in the environment as the regime has pursued its national strategy, and North Korea's South Korea policy has consequently been makeshift rather than based on certain principles or precepts. For example, North Korea transitioned to a conciliatory attitude towards South Korea just six months after the 8th Party congress of the WPK by setting forth a security strategy intended to take the initiative on fostering an advantageous external environment, even though it had stated the preconditions of solving fundamental issues first and improving inter-Korean relations conditionally. This shift in policy appears to have been influenced by both foreign and domestic factors such as the announcement of its North Korea policy by the Biden administration and lackluster progress in the new five-year national economic development plan. Preparations need to be made for the prospect of North Korea's security strategy changing based on the given conditions and circumstances, and the regime's South Korea policy changing as a result as well. Therefore, South Korea's policies vis-à-vis North Korea should focus on feasible and sustainable areas considering the inconsistency of North Korea's security strategy and South Korea policy.

Second, North Korea can be expected to tie the suspension of South Korea's increased military spending to the improvement of inter-Korean relations, including the declaration of the end of the Korean War, given the regime's sensitive responses on the issue. This is because increased military spending by South Korea is feared by North Korea to result in the loss of its initiative in inter-Korean relations, and as an obstacle to the implementation of its five-year national economic development plan due to how it compels North Korea to increase its own military spending as a

result of the security dilemma. Therefore, it appears North Korea will explore ways in which it can stop increased military spending by South Korea at an early stage. This consequently means that South Korea must continue to increase military spending in order to fulfill the conditions necessary for wartime operational control (OPCON) but, at the same time, be ready for possible arms restriction or arms control agreements with North Korea. This is because these specific measures are an appropriate and legitimate response to North Korea's demands on this issue.

Third, the logical problems found in North Korea's argument that the declaration of the end of the Korean War requires certain preconditions or in another claim that such a declaration is too early must be highlighted. If joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises and increased military spending by South Korea are obstacles to declaring the end of the Korean war as North Korea claims, North Korea also needs to make its own efforts to fulfill the preconditions. Through the September 19 CMA, the two Koreas have already agreed to discuss these preconditions at the inter-Korean Military Committee. Therefore, North Korea should be reminded that its participation in the Military Committee to begin discussions is the right and rational thing to do, rather than waiting for South Korea to meet their demands.

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