



## Online Series

2022. 04. 06. | CO 22-09

# Kim Yo-Jong's Statement on South Korea and Why the Issue of Preemptive Strikes was Mentioned

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North Korea's criticism of South Korea has recently been unusually intense. Denunciations of South Korea through North Korean propaganda outlets have increased between January and March this year, and have especially intensified since the presidential election in South Korea. Following this trend, deputy director Kim Yo-jong issued two separate statements on April 2 and 4, respectively. Secretary Pak Jong-chon, representing the North Korean military, added to the regime's criticism of South Korea with his statement on April 2. On the surface, each of these statements took issue with recent comments by South Korea's minister of national defense Seo Wook who mentioned that South Korea "has the ability and posture to conduct precision strikes on the origin of any attack and its command and support facilities if and when signs of a missile attack becomes clear" at the ceremony commemorating the restructuring of the Army Missile Strategic Command and the Air Force Missile Defense Command on April 1. The statements by Kim and Pak criticized these comments as threats of 'preemptive strikes.' The increasing frequency of criticism of South Korea observed this year, the reappearance of Kim Yo-jong, North Korea's sensitive reaction to preemptive strikes, and the regime's emphasis of its status as a nuclear state are all texts that can be used to anticipate North Korea's strategic and tactical approach towards South Korea in the near future. This paper analyzes these recent statements, the trend of increasing criticism of South Korea by North Korea, the intent and context of problematizing the issue of preemptive strikes, and North Korea's strategy toward South Korea expected in the future.

## Reappearance of Kim Yo-jong, Prospect of Changes to Tactical Changes in North Korea's Attitude towards South Korea

First, there is a need to pay attention to the reappearance of deputy director Kim Yo-jong and secretary Pak Jong-chon. Secretary Pak's statement was issued for the first time in 841 days since December 14, 2019, and deputy director Kim's statement was her first in 209 days since September 24, 2021. Based on previous patterns, North Korea's tactics have changed whenever deputy director Kim issued a statement. For instance, North Korea's tactical stance towards South Korea and the U.S. has changed whenever deputy director Kim was at the forefront during instances such as the explosion of the inter-Korean liaison office in June 2020, her July 10 statement that extensively outlined North Korea's position on negotiations with the U.S., her shorter statement also addressing the U.S. in June 2021, and her statements in August and September 2021 that both demanded the suspension of U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises and criticized the 'provocation' remark. These remarks were intended to threaten to terminate inter-Korean agreements, raise the bar for U.S.-North Korea negotiations, make claims about the unfairness of 'double standards,' and stress the idea of weapons development for self-defense. After each statement, North Korea instituted its positions such as the initial withdrawal of hostile policies by the U.S., abolition of the combative primary enemy approach, and priority development of strategic weapons into policy through meetings of the Party and speeches by Kim Jong-un. Essentially, Kim Yo-jong's statements have played the role of belligerently opening the path towards a more aggressive tactical approach.

Second, it is also noteworthy that the statements were released through the Rodong Sinmun. Last year, North Korea appeared to have revised the contents of page six of the Rodong Sinmun by combining the space on inter-Korean relations and other news regarding South Korea with the newspaper's international section, effectively reducing or eliminating the former. As a result, articles or columns regarding South Korea have been rare in the Rodong Sinmun until recently. Instead, criticism of South Korea has mostly appeared in propaganda outlets targeting audiences abroad. However, the recent statements were distributed to the people of North Korea as

well by being published on page four of the Rodong Sinmun. This was likely intended to unite the North Korean public ahead of major national holidays in April by demonstrating North Korea's superiority over South Korea as a nuclear state and by expressing the leadership's resolve in pressuring South Korea. From a tactical perspective vis-a-vis Seoul, it appears to be intended to dominate relations with the newly elected South Korean government by overtly exposing the rhetorical sensitivity of inter-Korean relations during the transition period.

These elements alone may perhaps be insufficient to conclude that North Korea's tactical stance toward the new South Korean government has been decided. Regardless, the statements represent the strong intent of North Korea to demonstrate that it has the strategic and tactical advantage to alter inter-Korean relations as it deems necessary. Such rhetoric can be viewed as a tactical approach typical of North Korea. It is the method of acting voluminously and simultaneously whenever such behavior is needed to shape the environment or gain the upper hand during certain periods. North Korea has done so since the beginning of this year to increase tensions by conducting 11 missile test launches, aggressively criticizing South Korea, and problematizing certain actions or comments. It is a tactic to gain the initiative by first deteriorating the situation and then pressuring South Korea by claiming that whether relations can improve will depend on the attitude of Seoul. North Korea's display of its tactical confidence in its ability to 'proactively' impact inter-Korean relations has become a type of pattern observed whenever a new administration is inaugurated in South Korea.

### **Mention of Preemptive Strikes as a Sign of Concern about Policy Coordination on North Korea, Establishment of New Operational Plan, and Precision Strike Capabilities of the U.S. and South Korea**

Third, it is necessary to examine the context of mentions of 'preemptive strikes.' There has been a significant increase in the number of articles criticizing South Korea from January to March this year in North Korea's propaganda outlets targeting

audiences abroad compared to last year. This trend has been more pronounced since the presidential election. Among the issues criticized, the political debate on ‘preemptive strikes’ drew the most attention as it is an issue that North Korea has traditionally responded to sensitively. This year, the crafting of a new operational plan (OPLAN) by the U.S. and South Korea has been mentioned frequently in relation to the ‘preemptive strike’ strategy. Through the 53<sup>rd</sup> Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) held last December, the U.S. and South Korean ministers of defense approved the ‘strategic planning guidance (SPG)’ needed to craft a new OPLAN. Based on this, the U.S.–South Korea Joint Chiefs of Staff (JSC) has drafted a new ‘strategic planning directive (SPD)’ and the U.S.–ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC) is currently in the process of planning and establishing an OPLAN that reflects these initiatives. A new OPLAN had become necessary because ten years had passed since ‘OPLAN 5015’ was established in 2010 and because the advancement of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal needed to be reflected. North Korea had increased its criticism of the new OPLAN since last December and has reacted aggressively to issues such as the Kill Chain, strengthening of extended deterrence, and expansion of U.S.–ROK joint military exercises that were debated during the presidential election in South Korea. North Korea perceives these proposals as threats to its status as a nuclear state by enhancing precision strike capabilities against North Korea and explicitly raising the possibility of preemptive strikes.

In addition, the statements may have been influenced by the Biden administration’s release of the nuclear posture review (NPR). The fact sheet of the fifth iteration of the NPR released on March 30 stated that “the United States would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners” in accordance with the fundamental role of deterring nuclear attacks against the U.S. and its allies.<sup>1)</sup> This statement is identical to the 2018 NPR issued during the Trump administration. This represented

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1) U.S. Department of Defense, “Fact Sheet: 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and Missile Defense Review,” March 29, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/29/2002965339/-1/-1/1/FACT-SHEET-2022-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-AND-MISSILE-DEFENSE-REVIEW.PDF> (Accessed April 6, 2022).

a shift from President Biden's approach that he had maintained during the elections and early in his administration that nuclear weapons had the 'sole purpose' of use in retaliation against a nuclear attack. While the phrase 'extreme circumstances' has not been specifically disclosed, it is clearly different from the 'sole purpose use of nuclear weapons' in response to a nuclear strike by an adversary that President Biden supported during the elections. While specifics can not be confirmed because the full NPR has not yet been released, it appears likely that strategic ambiguity will be maintained by implying the possibility of using nuclear weapons in every situation ranging from non-nuclear threats, conventional warfare, and escalation to nuclear war. This can be viewed as a reflection of concerns raised by U.S. allies under the nuclear umbrella, including key allies in Europe. North Korea may be concerned that the Biden administration's abandonment of its position of the 'sole purpose use of nuclear weapons' makes it more possible that the U.S. will use low-yield nuclear weapons as a preemptive strike based on its own judgment, even in the absence of nuclear war.

The NPR is the U.S. administration's review and drafting of its nuclear policy that is usually conducted every 8 years. Since the first NPR in 1994 was released by the Clinton administration, this recent process represents the fifth NPR. The purpose of the NPR is to establish America's forthcoming nuclear policy and strategy as well as to announce its strategic goals and force posture. In 2002 under the Bush administration, the U.S. designated in the NPR not only nuclear states in Russia and China but other states such as North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Syria as seven countries that America would use nuclear weapons against in the event of a nuclear crisis. The 2018 NPR by the Trump administration mentioned the 'strengthening of low-yield nuclear weapons capabilities' and expressed the intent to firmly respond against the use of nuclear weapons by North Korea.<sup>2)</sup> The NPR further considered North Korea and Iran as potential threats, an accusation that North Korea vigorously

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2) Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)," February 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF> (Accessed April 6, 2022).

protested. 'Low yield nuclear capabilities' refer to the ability to debilitate targeted areas through precision strikes with nuclear weapons of lower yields. This is a prospect that North Korea considers extremely threatening as it increases the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons by enhancing its utility while also partially evading normative constraints.

Both the short-range ballistic missiles that North Korea has revealed since 2019 as well as the long-range cruise missiles and the hypersonic missiles that it has recently claimed to have completed development of can mount low yield nuclear warheads in the future. As a matter of fact, North Korea has proposed the diversification of its tactical nuclear arsenal as a strategic goal during the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). Such actions by North Korea can be viewed as a response to America's nuclear policy and the arms race in Northeast Asia. Not only does the threat of nuclear attack through low yield warheads exist in the region but it also severely threatens North Korea. It is unlikely for North Korea to directly respond to the 2022 NPR since it has not yet been released in full and whether North Korea is explicitly mentioned has not been confirmed. However, it is possible that North Korea would issue an indirect response by criticizing the South Korean government given how the regime's regards America's nuclear policy as a part of the hostile policies against North Korea.

Overall, comments referring to 'preemptive strikes' in Kim Yo-jong's statement may have been prompted by North Korea's psychological reaction to a combination of developments, including measures by the U.S. and South Korea to draft a new OPLAN, indications for an expansion of U.S.-ROK joint military exercises, the North Korea policy of the incoming South Korean government, and the NPR. In other words, it is possible that the statement is based on an actual perception of threat rather than merely being intended to gain the initiative vis-a-vis the new South Korean government or justify its cause. The statement indicates a fundamental fear in North Korea of 'preemptive strikes' by the U.S. and South Korea. It is possible that North Korea is afraid that its nuclear facilities and nuclear capabilities will be nullified by precise preemptive strikes either through enhanced precision strike capabilities achieved through the establishment of a new OPLAN or through the strengthening of America's



low yield nuclear arsenal.

### **Foreshadowing an Aggressive Stance towards the New South Korean Government**

Fourth, there is a need to examine the context in which the second statement issued by Kim Yo-jong raised the issue of the ‘primary enemy approach.’ Since September and October of last year, North Korea has abolished its traditional combative ‘primary enemy approach’ that defines South Korea and the U.S. as the main enemies of North Korea. Instead, North Korea has claimed that war, rather than South Korea, is the primary enemy and that North Korea would not attack unless attacked upon. This position can be viewed as having multiple objectives. First, it can be understood from the perspective of building a counter-argument against the anticipated criticism by the U.S. and South Korea as well as the international community in response to tests of various strategic weapons as part of North Korea’s ‘five-year plan for the development of national defense science and weapons systems.’ In other words, abolishing the idea of a primary enemy is intended to develop the logic that the project is within the boundaries of weapons development for self-defense legitimately granted to all states. It is designed to demonstrate that North Korea’s development of weapons is not directed at a specific primary enemy but should rather be considered as part of routine national security measures to prevent war itself.

Another purpose is to threateningly demonstrate its power to South Korea through North Korea’s self-proclaimed status as a nuclear state amidst challenges of acquiring a minimum degree of deterrence against the U.S. via nuclear weapons advancement, as well as to disguise its anxiousness regarding South Korea’s increased power and mid- to long-term increases in military capabilities. From North Korea’s perspective, enhancements of the U.S. and South Korea’s ability to launch precision strikes against North Korea’s nuclear facilities would result in a decrease in the utility of North Korea’s nuclear weapons. This recent mention of ‘preemptive strikes’ may give the impression as if North Korea is avoiding direct confrontation with the incoming ROK government

and being more measured as the comment was directed at a ministerial official within the incumbent administration. However, this may actually be forecasting its aggressive stance toward the new South Korean government. In the near future, North Korea is likely to adopt a more aggressive stance by first maintaining a hardline attitude towards South Korea and protesting through provocations, then justifying its actions based on the expected opposition from the South Korean government.

### **Possibility of Preparing for Displays of Military Power in April and Justify these Actions**

Fifth, there is also the possibility that these recent statements were intended to prepare or prewarn events in North Korea scheduled for April. In other words, the statements are part of preparations for, and rhetoric to justify, any military parades, demonstrations of military power, testing of weapons systems, and messages to either South Korea or the U.S. on the occasions of the birthday of Kim Il-sung on April 15, the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kim Jong-un's appointment as chairman and first secretary on the April 11, and the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Korean People's Revolutionary Army on April 25. The regime is likely to visibly highlight its status as a 'nuclear state' in any form to compensate for its loss of reputation precipitated by the alleged disguising of the Hwaseong-17 missile launch, the increased likelihood of joint U.S.-ROK military exercises, and the close coordination on North Korea policy between the U.S. and South Korea. In particular, provocations that North Korea had previously announced to conduct soon, such as the launch of a 'military reconnaissance satellite' or test launch of a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), may occur during the month of April. These actions can also be perceived as responses to South Korea's successful test of its solid-fuel space rocket, the launch of the Nuri scheduled in June, and its plans to develop subminiature reconnaissance satellites.



## **Refraining from Criticizing the U.S., Leaving Open the Prospect of Bilateral Negotiations while Continuing to Advance Nuclear Weapons**

Lastly, there is a need to pay attention to the absence of criticism of the U.S. in stark contrast with North Korea's increasing denouncement of South Korea. Criticism of the U.S. has consistently been absent since 2020. How should this disparity be understood? North Korea views its two bilateral summit meetings with the U.S. as very significant. In publications summarizing the 10 years of the Kim Jong-un regime that have been released since last year, a majority of the space has been devoted to the historical meaning of the summit meetings in terms of North Korea's accomplishments abroad during this period. North Korea's cautious approach to criticizing the U.S. can be interpreted as the regime's intent not to completely shut down and leave open the prospect of negotiations with the U.S., even as it prioritizes the advancement of its nuclear arsenal. North Korea's five-year plan for the development of national defense science and weapons systems is scheduled to be completed by 2025, the same year that a new administration will take office in the U.S. During his speech at the exhibition on the development of national defense held last year, Kim Jong-un stressed the irreversible completion of an advanced nuclear arsenal by claiming that the nation will first become stronger. Over the remaining four years of the five-year plan, North Korea may be hoping to transition to a phase of resumed negotiations with the U.S. after bolstering its strength through the development of a more diversified arsenal of nuclear weapons. Through this process, North Korea may seek to justify its development of weapons with an aggressive stance towards South Korea and by maintaining a certain level of tensions in inter-Korean relations.

The new South Korean government needs to understand the strategic and tactical stance of North Korea from a range of perspectives. In other words, there needs to be a comprehensive understanding of North Korea's intentions. North Korea may attempt to change its attitude at a certain time in the future once it completes its development of offensive strategic weapons. In this way, North Korea may return to the negotiation table on equal grounds with the U.S. and not be unilaterally forced

to denuclearize and instead be recognized as a nuclear state to discuss limited nuclear arms control. Based on the pursuit of this ultimate goal, North Korea will seek to achieve the following narrower objectives; prompt South Korea to increase its military capabilities and to assume a hardline stance as much as possible to use it as justification for its own actions, induce the U.S. to lower the barrier for negotiations by leveraging America's position of not being able to explicitly counter North Korea's advancement of nuclear weapons, and proudly display the regime's domestic accomplishments through the advancement of nuclear weapons. 'Double standards,' 'threat of preemptive strikes,' 'abolishing the concept of a primary enemy,' 'withdrawal of hostile policies against North Korea,' and 'actions for self-defense' are all specific examples of North Korea's responses and aggressive logic for the operationalization of these higher- and lower-level goals. Future policies on North Korea need to be designed in response to these objectives of North Korea.

However, it is impossible to exclude the prospect of a new path in the mid- and long-term. North Korea has recently clarified its position supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While it may be a regular diplomatic gesture, reports of high-ranking officials from North Korea and Russia exchanging opinions on cooperating on current affairs may signal that the two countries have reached either a direct or indirect consensus on fostering closer strategic cooperation. A similar position has been observed regarding China as well. Regardless of negotiations between Russia and Ukraine or the loss of Russia's global reputation, North Korea may be seeking to buy time or gain assistance necessary for its development of weapons, or be preparing for the prospect of negotiations with the U.S. eventually failing through a joint stance with Russia and China. An accurate response to North Korea's behavior is needed more than ever during the period of power transition in Seoul and the early stages of the new Yoon administration in the ROK. ©KINU 2022

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