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Analysis of Kim, Jong-un's Designation of 'Republic of Korea as Primary Foe' and Inspection of Major Military Factories

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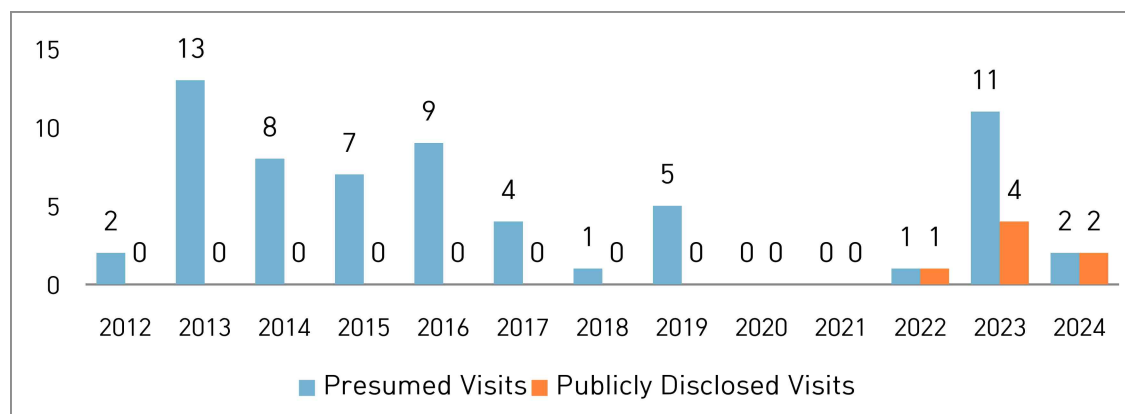
North Korea's *Rodong Sinmun* on January 10 reported that Kim, Jong-un, the General Secretary of the North Korean Workers' Party, visited major military factories on January 8-9. Through this on-site inspection, Kim, Jong-un emphasized the "sustained accumulation of overwhelming power" in terms of "strengthening of war preparedness," and highlighted full-scale production and modernization of key weapon systems, establishment of production processes, and expansion of production capacity. He also declared South Korea as a "primary foe," and announced the enhancement of self-defense and nuclear deterrence capabilities accordingly. North Korea admitted that it failed in its approach toward unification dialogue at the end of last year's 9th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party, during which it defined 'South Korea' as an enemy instead of a country sharing kinship. Immediately afterwards, Kim, Jong-un "himself," explicitly and clearly demonstrated for the first time that it views South Korea as the "principal enemy" through on-site inspections. Kim, Jong-un's statements serve as a clear indication of the party's policy and thus, his hard-line policies toward South Korea are likely to be visualized in various ways, including military actions. This article analyzes the characteristics that are visible in Kim Jong-un's on-site inspection of major military factories, the intent behind

the designation of “primary foe,” and forecasts its potential, future actions.

Creation of a Pattern on Disclosed Military Factory Inspections, a Display of Its Military Production Capabilities to the International Community

Kim, Jong-un publicly conducted six inspections including the most recent inspection, on a total of 14 factories, between 2022 and 2024. When considering individual factory visits since Kim, Jong-un took power, they amount to 57 inspections in total.¹⁾ Apart from the six instances that it officially reported as ‘military factories’ (a total of 14 factory visits), the remaining 43 instances were not explicitly referred to as “military factories” but were factories known or presumed to be related to military production. *Rodong Sinmun* first reported on January 28, 2022 that “on-site inspection was conducted on military factories producing important weapons system,” and afterward, Kim, Jong-un’s inspection of military factories was disclosed publicly. This appears to convey its intention of sending a message, both domestically and internationally, about its weapons production system.

<Figure 1> On-site Inspections of ‘Military Factories’ Reported by *Rodong Sinmun*



Source: The Author

¹⁾ The unit count of visits refers to a method of reporting where, even if multiple military factories are visited on different dates and then covered in a single report, each individual factory visited within one report is counted as one visit, rather than aggregating the count based on the number of reports.

Strong Emphasis on Strategic Weapon Deployment and the Production System, and Criticism of Deficiencies in Military Production

Through the recent inspection, Kim, Jong-un emphasized the successful achievement of its military production goals presented at the 8th Party Congress, the full-scale production of key weapon systems, the introduction of new technologies, the establishment of production processes, the expansion of production capabilities, and the execution of modernization and redevelopment goals. North Korea has been emphasizing the role of the defense industry related to ‘mass production’ and the modernization of the military since last year. If distinguished based on different time periods, a trend is visible where the focus shifts from experimentation and development to practical deployment and drills, and then to mass production systems throughout the first phase of nuclear weapon advancement (2013–2017) and the second phase of nuclear weapon advancement (2019–present). Particularly noteworthy is the strong emphasis on practical deployment and mass production systems in the third and fourth year of the five-year defense development plan, which is the previous year and this year respectively.

Disclosure of a Missile Launch Vehicle Production Factory for New-Type Tactical Guided Weapon System, with the Purpose of Demonstrating the Ability to Mass Produce Strategic Nuclear Weapons to “Subjugate the South Korean Territories”

The missile launch vehicles North Korea disclosed through the photographs of the inspection of military factories are part of the new-type tactical guided weapon system that it tested and used for military drills. Such photographs were disclosed in April 17, 2022, and March 10, 2023, through *Rodong Sinmun*. Since the close-range ballistic missile (CRBM) to be used by the Western Front Long-range Artillery Sector Detachment was introduced to serve the purpose of strengthening the “operational effectiveness of strategic nuclear weapons” and “practical combat capability of nuclear

combat force” during the test conducted in April 2022, strategic nuclear warhead may be mounted onto it. During the military drill in March 2023, virtual exercises were performed through simulations, with important factors in the enemy’s operational airfields reflected in the exercises. This missile named ‘Hwasong-11Ra’ was disclosed at North Korean Defense Exhibition, ‘Self-Defense 2021.’ The firing range is 150–200km, and it is presumed to be a variant of the KN-23 as the diameter is similar to that of the KN-23. The intentions behind visiting the missile launch vehicle production factory for new-type tactical guided weapon system after inspecting the missile launch vehicle production factory for ‘Hwasong-18’ intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on January 4 (reported on 5), appear to highlight the fact that North Korea already has mass production systems in place for CRBMs onto which nuclear warheads can be mounted. The visit seems deliberate, intended to demonstrate the possession and mass production of weapons that will be used to “subjugate the South Korean territories” in case of contingencies that Kim, Jong-un emphasized during the 9th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Ruling Workers’ Party of Korea on December 31.

Reasons for Emphasizing Mass Production Systems of Important Weapons, Introduction of New Production Technologies, Possibility of Cooperation with Russia

Since June 2022, North Korea has emphasized ‘war preparations’ and the ‘modernization of weapon production’ following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine earlier that year. Considering various indicators, it seems that North Korea has been actively engaging in full-scale arms production to meet both internal and external demands and supply weapons to Russia. It appears that North Korea is focusing on ‘mass production’ as it aims to showcase deterrence capabilities against South Korea and the US, meet internal demands, and to supply to Russia and other countries simultaneously. The emphasis on “introduction of new production technologies,” “establishment of production processes, expansion of production capacity, modernization and innovative redevelopment” suggests a focus on mutually beneficial technological cooperation with Russia in particular, to create mass production systems

that can satisfy its internal military demands and facilitate the mass production of weapons to be supplied to Russia.

Kim, Jong-un's Mention of 'ROK is the Principal Enemy,' Indication of Ultra-Hardline Response to South Korea and Possibility of Nuclear Weapons Use

During the 9th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea, Kim, Jong-un stated that inter-Korean relationship is no longer based on kinship, and that two independent states are at war with each other. Since then, South Korea was designated as its "principal enemy" for the first time through Kim, Jong-un's explicit statement. Kim, Jong-un first mentioned 'principal enemy' at the 8th Party Congress in January 2021, but that was under the context of a war being the principal enemy and not South Korea or the US. However, given the context of the statement "it is time for us to acknowledge the reality and clarify our relationship as a relationship between two belligerents at war," and "as this cannot be avoided nor reversed," North Korea has clearly made a paradigm 'shift' regarding its policies toward South Korea.

Anticipated Course of Action

In the future, North Korea's actions toward South Korea are expected to manifest in various ways. One potential pattern is a proportional or exaggerated response to South Korean (or ROK-US) exercises or military actions. Particularly during large-scale ROK-US joint exercises in February–April and August–September, there is a high likelihood of aggressive response in the form of "operations." There may be bold missile demonstrations showcasing the "asymmetry" of possessing strategic nuclear weapons, blaming the ROK-US (and Japan) exercises.

In November 2022, North Korea made a series of 'operational' responses against the ROK-US joint air exercise Vigilant Storm for the first time instead of the typical drills it conducted. Since nuclear operations will be incorporated into the ROK-US joint exercises scheduled in August following the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG)



meetings, North Korea may exacerbate tensions with more aggressive responses. This could also be the reason behind North Korea's reappointment of Park, Jong-chon as the Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, to lead such operations.

Second, it is highly likely that North Korea conducts drills and demonstrates its weapons to create tension for the upcoming South Korean general elections. Rather than localized provocations involving weapons or forces across the Northern Limit Line (NLL) or the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), there is a greater possibility of frequent exercises simulating provocations and threats in the East and West Seas, aiming to escalate tensions and shape South Korean public opinion that the inter-Korean relations have failed. Third, there is a possibility of deploying unmanned combat aerial vehicles, unmanned reconnaissance aerial vehicles, underwater weapons to carry out threats that are challenging for South Korea to counter. This could involve launching missiles from unmanned aerial vehicles along the coastlines of the East and West Seas or positioning unmanned reconnaissance drones near the Military Demarcation Line for reconnaissance actions for demonstration purposes, creating tension. Additionally, it can engage in threats by launching strategic cruise missiles or nuclear torpedoes from underwater or maritime locations towards specific target points in the South. ©KINU 2024

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