

Interpreting North Korea's 2012 New Year's Joint Editorial

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On January 1, 2012, North Korea's annual New Year's Day editorial was issued jointly by three North Korean publications – Rodong Sinmun Korean People's Army and Socialist Youth League. This year's editorial, entitled "Glorify This Year 2012 as a Year of Proud Victory, a Year When an Era of Prosperity is Unfolding, True to the Instructions of the Great General Kim Jong Il," is structured in a manner similar to the editorial for 1995, the year after Kim Il Sung's death: expressions of mourning for Kim Jong Il and descriptions his achievements in leadership → emphasis on solidarity around Kim Jong Eun → evaluation of the past year's achievements → summary of tasks for the coming year.

This year's joint editorial shows several distinct characteristics, as follows. First, it focuses on strengthening internal solidarity around Kim Jong Eun, emphasizing the parting legacy of Kim Jong Il. Expressions of mourning for Kim Jong Il and emphasis on uniting around Kim Jong Eun, such as "the greatest loss," "the bitterest grief," "single-minded unity," "turning the great sorrow into one-thousand-fold strength and courage," etc., are expressed in nearly the same form and proportion as at the time of Kim Il Sung's death. Kim Jong Eun is

mentioned by his titles as the head of the KWP Central Committee and the supreme commander of the revolutionary forces, formalizing his succession to the highest level of leadership.

Second, use of the "great strong and prosperous nation" (kangseong daeguk) slogan has markedly decreased, and this slogan has been largely replaced by the terms "revival of strength and prosperity" (kangseong buheung) or "strong and prosperous nation" (kangseong guk), revealing a defensive posture. The "great strong and prosperous nation" slogan was used 16 times in 2010 and 19 times in 2011, but only 5 times in this year's editorial. This expression was used as a way of handling symbolic and long-term goals. This editorial placed greater emphasis on praise for the greatness and achievements of Kim Jong Il and fulfillment of his legacy than on the significance of 2012 as the 100th anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth and the "year of opening the gates of a great strong and prosperous nation."

Third, compared to last year's joint editorial, this year military issues and the role of the Party have been more prominently mentioned. Primary emphasis is placed on the role of the military as the central leader of the "military-first revolution" and as the "shock troops" for constructing a strong and prosperous nation. This reflects an awareness of the absolute importance of the military's role in stabilizing the uncertain internal and external situation following Kim Jong Il's death and resolving the top-priority issue, namely the economic problem. The greater emphasis placed on mobilization, rather than establishing a festive atmosphere for the "year of opening the gates of a great strong and prosperous nation," can be considered exceptional. Last year's editorial presented the year's major tasks in the following order of precedence: improving the people's living standards → the Party's leadership role → the military's achievements in construction → South Korea policy → foreign policy.

Fourth, it appears that Kim Jong Eun's leadership power is to be supplemented by the Party organization via an expansion of the roles and functions of the Central Party. This indicates that the governing system of direct, personal rule by absolute leader Kim Jong Il is to be replaced through a revival of the functions of the Party.

Fifth, while focusing on regime unity by strengthening political ideology, the editorial also lists "improving the people's standard of living" as a priority task in an effort to minimize public dissatisfaction and secure regime stability.

It is likely that North Korea's foreign policy will be as passive as possible. The basic tone of its South Korea policy will be to focus efforts on promoting a "united front

struggle" while disregarding official dialogue. Whereas the 2010 Joint New Year's Editorial emphasized "opening a path to improved inter-Korean relations" and the 2011 version stressed the need to "act directly to promote dialogue and cooperation," such appeasing statements have now disappeared and greater weight is placed on the anti-government struggle.

In foreign policy North Korea will proceed with its pro-China policy line, while maintaining sufficiently good relations with the US to sustain the momentum of existing dialogue. The joint editorial stresses that this has been achieved, in spite of the difficult external environment, through strong cooperation with China and Russia. No mention is given to the light-water reactor or the centrifuge facility, achievements in which the 2011 New Year's Joint Editorial took such pride. This year's editorial is also silent on the second round of high-level talks with the US. The failure to mention anything related to denuclearization, the Six Party Talks, or the US suggests that North Korea will not be very assertive in its US policy. However, they will try to proceed with the existing agreement on provision of 240,000 tons of nutritious food and three rounds of US-DPRK high-level talks. Meanwhile, the demand to remove US troops from South Korea indicates that even if the Six Party Talks are restarted their primary focus will be on creation of a peace regime rather than denuclearization.

The 2012 editorial reveals a defensive tone in overall policy, and for practical purposes the North Korean authorities have no choice but to focus on securing the new regime around Kim Jong Eun. In light of this reality, our response should proceed through the following stages: ① managing the North Korean situation, ② remaining vigilant about provocations, ③ unifying national discourse, ④ proceeding to "management mode" through cooperation with regional countries. If North Korea's policy toward the South remains passive, there is a limit to how flexible our policy can be.

However, as North Korea can be expected to grow more sensitive due to its sense of crisis in the wake of Kim Jong Il's death, it will be necessary to manage the situation and allay its fears. It will likely become more difficult to hold official talks, but we still need to continue with civilian contacts and humanitarian aid.

For North Korea the path to dialogue and cooperation is wide open, but rather than hoping for immediate improvement in inter-Korean relations it would be better to take a calm, steady approach focused on laying the long-term groundwork in anticipation of a stable Kim Jong Eun regime and future change. North Korea's repeated "refusal to associate" reflects its internal need to conceal the vulnerability

of its power base and avoid damaging the "mourning" atmosphere. This is part of its strategy of pressuring the South to achieve a "shift" in North Korea policy, and there is no need for us to react reflexively to this.

Instead, as the new leadership emerges in North Korea, we need to take the broader approach of establishing a new inter-Korean relationship. Therefore, despite North Korea's resistant stance, we need to leave the door open to official talks and push forward with the resolution of issues that can be addressed purely at the official level – such as humanitarian aid, separated families, Mt. Kumgang tourism, and revitalization of the Kaesong Industrial Complex – while enlivening exchange and cooperation at the civilian level, as an extension of the flexibility the government has begun to show.

Yet at the same time, while the North continues to emphasize its "military-first" ideology and Kim Jong Eun's military leadership, we cannot overlook the possibility that it may try to shape conditions for the sake of internal solidarity. Thus we should always be watchful for additional North Korean provocations.

In particular North Korea can be expected to take advantage of South Korea's political situation in this election year by intensifying its strategy of creating fractures in our national discourse. Therefore in the coming year we must focus more energy on establishing a long-term direction for our North Korea policy and building internal consensus than on our immediate policy actions toward the North.

Unlike its relations with South Korea, North Korea is expected to keep up the momentum of talks with the US. Therefore we must work closely in cooperation with the US to prevent any North Korean efforts to estrange ROK-US relations and avoid a reprisal of domestic concerns of a "Talk with the US, Isolate the South" strategy.