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Analysis of 2017 North Korea's New Year's Day Speech and Prospect for its Internal and External Policy

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North Korea aired 2017 New Year's Day speech delivered by Kim Jong-un via Korean Central Television (KCTV) at 12:30 (12:00 Pyongyang time) on January 1. This New Year's Day address has garnered a lot of attention, especially on its message toward South Korea and the U.S. for the following reasons. First, a tumultuous year marked by big events – two nuclear tests, the 7th Congress of Workers' Party, and 200-day battle – has come to an end. And second, transition of power is taking place both in the U.S. and the Republic of Korea. However, rather than delivering a new message, the North only repeated the same requests, such as the demand for the U.S. to withdraw its hostile policy toward North Korea and to stop a war exercise. In other words, the North regime decided to maintain its wait and see approach at a time when the policy and disposition of the Trump administration have not fully come into being. By contrast, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) hinted its intention to reinforce the propaganda to provoke South Korea in line with an unification rhetoric that the current South administration has brought inter-Korean relations into the brink of collapse and that the current domestic situation in the South was triggered by the public outrage accumulated over the conservative administration. The achievements

made in 2016 were mainly highlighted without laying out the specific tasks for 2017. The North appears to maintain an existing internal and external policy, sticking to the strategy of “advancing nuclear and missile development” and “solidifying internal forces through mobilizing military power,” rather than offering a radical proposal or policy in a preemptive response to the upcoming events.

Main Characteristics : Maintenance of Nuclear-Missile Advancement and Conservative Policy

① New Year’s Day Speech with Focus on Achievements and Rapid Mobilization of North Korean Residents

New Year’s Day address mainly consists of two pillars - achievements of the previous year in 2016 and tasks of the upcoming year in 2017. Achievements of 2016 were largely summed up as the followings: ① Congress of Korean Workers’ Party; ② Nuclear-missile advancement; and ③ 70 day ·200 day battles. While new year addresses of the past only laid out a series of achievements for each sector, this time the North has sought to identify the meaningful connections among those three events through this New Year’s Day message. The gist of this year’s speech is that Congress of KWP, nuclear-missile advancement, and 70 day·200 day battles all have been made possible thanks to the deeply rooted spirit of “self-reliance and self-development” and that the residents are required to uphold this spirit in 2017 and make an all-out-effort to follow through the decisions made at KWP Congress. This statement indicates that North Korea intends to take the internal and external policy posture of 2016 to new year.

② Expression of Strong Willingness for Maintenance of Nuclear-Missile Advancement

The part that stands out the most in this year’s speech is that it unprecedentedly allocated quite a lot of space to achievements of nuclear-missile advancement. It laid out specific achievements of nuclear-missile advancement with an expression

of “ground-breaking transition of strengthened defense power.” It also stated that the North is in the final stage of preparing for test-launching an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICMB). This message reaffirmed the tone of aggressive nuclear policy posture that North Korea will “continue to strengthen its self-defense power and preemptive strike capability grounded on nuclear armament” if South Korea refuses to stop a war exercise. The North mentioned in great detail a stage of nuclear and missile advancement by each weapon for the first time in new year message, which hints its strong focus on nuclear advancement in 2017.

③ “All-Out-Battle to Mobilize all Residents” in the Face of International Sanctions against North Korea

Kim Jong-un hinted in new year message that 70 day·200 day battles took place in an attempt to find a path of survival in the midst of heavy sanctions imposed on North Korea in 2016 and that the North will continue such approach in 2017. Kim stated that such battles waged last year counterattacked an “anti-Republic maneuver that aimed to isolate and pressure the DPRK” and that those battles “served as a new breakthrough for the economic development, mobilizing all-out-efforts of North Korean residents.” It went to say that in 2017 North Koreans should take on a “marching path” and “strive for all-out-battle to mobilize all residents” firmly grounded on this spirit of such battle. Slogan of this year’s battle was chosen as “let’s make a progress for the success of socialism, building on great impetus of self-reliance and self-development!” This slogan indicates that the North will go with “all-out-battle mobilizing all the residents” if sanctions continue and no big change occurs in the global landscape this year. However, the actual mobilization efforts will likely to be concentrated on the production unit rather than on the political events.

④ Highlighting Feature of People-Loving Leader by Appealing to People’s Emotions in Marking Five Years of Ruling

What distinguishes this New Year's Day speech the most from the previous ones is that it was written in the first person with the use of "I," articulating the leader's personal feelings on his five years of ruling. Kim Jong-un stated that "I have not fully expressed my love for people as much as I wish and have always carried a sense of regret and self-blame with me throughout last year and I know I only have myself to blame for my lack of ability to take care of people" and that "a sense of remorse is what makes me more determined, alert, and committed to do more for North Koreans." He went on to say that "I solemnly swear this morning of new year to become a royal servant to the public, tirelessly serving the people." Those remarks could be interpreted in various ways but one way to interpret is that it is a well-planned propaganda tool to display people-loving leader figure. North Koreans' level of fatigue is fairly high since recent flood dealt a heavy blow to the country and people have been mobilized in a hurried manner starting at the 70th anniversary of the KWP foundation on October 2015. So the changes are that he is likely to attempt to console people by expressing emotions as a propaganda tool. It could also be interpreted in that he utilized his own sense of frustration in an attempt to ease the grievances or mistrust that may have accumulated over the years due to the reign of terror and tightened social rules and regulations ever since he took power.

⑤ Change of Format in New Year's Day Speech and Image Politics

This new year address broadcast at noon (Pyongyang time) came out at a different time from the previous years of 9 a.m., setting new precedent for new year message. When introducing new year speech, Kim Jong-un was called "supreme leader of the military, who delivered new year address." However, in 2016 new year message, he was referred to as "dear fellow Kim Jong-un." In new year address video, more footages were added and more efforts were put in editing the video. In last year's new year speech, he appeared to have shortness of breath in an unstable posture, moving his body back and forth when reading a transcript. He seemed to set it straight this time by looking directly into the prompter in a stable position. He was also in

his suit and tie unlike last year when he appeared in ordinary people's clothes. It seems to be part of highly calculated "image politics" to demonstrate a stable posture in leading up to the stage of full-blown idolization.

Political Sector: "Battle for Mobilizing All Residents" by Taking Control on the Lower Unit of Party and Social Organizations

One of the characteristics in the political sector of this year's speech was the emphasis placed on the need to strengthen regulations all the way to the base and lower units of party and social organizations so that it can lead to the specific production performance. Kim Jong-un made it clear through his new year message that "the role of party organizations and labor organizations will determine the success of this year's battle to follow through decisions made at the 7th Workers' Party Congress" and requested that policy be implemented even in the lower units of organizations. In 2016, he once renamed and reorganized organizations while hosting major congresses of social organizations, including Youth League(August), Democratic Women's Union(November), and Farmer's Union(December) for the first time in 20 to 30 years. In December, 2016, he hosted First Conference of Chairpersons of WPK Primary Committees for the first time in the North Korean history and emphasized the role of primary party - the essence of lower party organizations.

Such conferences came about as part of the follow-up measures for the reorganized and party-centered system implemented since the Seventh WPK Congress. Those could also be seen as part of reorganizing the base groups of social organizations and party lower units. In fact, it would be fair to interpret that the North had completed power shifting from the top all the way to the bottom starting at Party Congress last year and it now demands through new year message that party and social organizations carry out a "battle to mobilize all the residents" from the bottom. Another interpretation is that such statement reflects the regime's willingness to

reform the organizational culture, which has long been plagued with authoritarianism, bureaucracy, corruption, defeatism, self-protectionism, formalism, and maneuvering.

Economic Sector: Highlighting Five-Year-Plan for Economic Development without Detailed Plan

Two of major emphasis on the economic sector described in new year message are as follows: 1) how to implement a five-year-economic plan, which was presented at the 7th KWP Congress in 2016 and 2) what is alternative for addressing a harsh external environment, rapidly worsened by fourth and fifth nuclear tests in 2016. However, this new year address ended up laying out not that different policy direction from the previous year without a ground-breaking resolution.

Distinct feature of this New Year's Day message lies in a demand that all-out-efforts be put in conducting a five-year-economic plan. The message also emphasizes that 2017 is a make-or-break year that will determine the success of implementing a five-year-plan. It claims that revitalizing the economy is a pressing challenge and that detailed economic performance should be presented this year. However, details in new year speech was nothing more than just a replica of last year's policy. Not much difference has been made when compared to the previous year except that scientific technology was mentioned first with different priority given to each sector and mechanical industry was emphasized - a sector that was not even mentioned before in new year speech. Priority has been changed with electric, steering, and chemical sectors on the front burner and coal sector placed on the back burner, largely because sanctions seem to have put a break on exporting coals.

In the meantime, North Korea did not mention a measure to address worsening external environment caused by international sanctions although many expect that there would be one. Hence, it is fair to assume that the North does not have a clear answer to resolve the current situation. The regime is expected to confront

the current environment influenced by sanctions and bypass it. It will do so by attempting to increase productivity and make a bet through “all-out-battle mobilizing all the residents” in line with the spirit of “200 day battle.” And the North is likely to maintain a passive posture in the economic sector, putting a break on the economic reform, since there was no mentioning of a “method to manage the economy in our own way” that was briefly mentioned both in new year message of 2015 and 2016.

External Nuclear Sectors: Detailed Description of Nuclear Capability and Heightened Level of Nuclear Threats

Kim Jong-un ended up reiterating the same points made in 2016 new year address without laying out a changed stance on the external and nuclear-related security sectors. However, one noteworthy feature that sets the message apart from the previous speeches is that it openly highlights its nuclear capability and elevated level of nuclear threats. Kim Jong-un had refrained from mentioning nuclear capability and nuclear threats in new year’s address up until 2016 ever since he took power. However, in this year’s address, he defined year 2016 as a ground-breaking year that has achieved a breakthrough in strengthening the defense power. He also emphasized that the North is “in the final stage of test-launching ICBM” and made known its willingness to “strengthen nuclear power so long as the U.S. nuclear threats continue.” The Kim regime also demonstrated much more increased level of nuclear capability and threats when compared to the past, stating that we “will strengthen a preemptive strike capability - core nuclear power - if war drills continue” and that “2017 will be devoted to preparing for fights.” Such statements could be interpreted as the regime’s determination to maintain non-negotiable stance on the U.S. and its pursuit for radical struggle unless the Trump administration offers a conciliation on a large scale in a prompt manner.

The regime also made its intention clear to continue a radical policy toward the U.S. maintaining the same approach of last year. It also made its determination known

several times for a strong resistance to sanctions against the North. The message put an emphasis on the regime's ability to have successfully weathered the challenges on their own amidst the height of "political and military pressure and sanctions maneuver" of the international community. Such point aimed to send a message to the international community loud and clear that sanctions did not and will not work. Given new year message and the recent situation on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea will neither give up on possessing nuclear weapons, nor stop pursuing its nuclear advancement with forward-looking perspective. The situation plagued with sanctions is very likely to develop into a radical confrontation rather the conciliatory mode for the time being regardless of whether a representative in Pyongyang will its counterpart in Washington behind the scene in the future. The Kim regime is highly likely to show a strong resistance to sanctions of the international community that demands denuclearization. This in turn will make it even harder for North Korea to mend the relationships with China and Russia who openly and strongly disapprove to give North Korea a nuclear state status. Should the Trump administration increase the level of pressure and sanctions on the North, it will be faced with the North's nuclear and missile provocations. When that happens, North Korea will focus on missile provocations that directly target the American continent with Musudan missile, SLBM, and ICBM, and is highly likely to conduct a 6th nuclear test that aims to strengthen an explosive power of boosted fission weapon, which fell short of standard in the fourth nuclear test.

Inter-Korean Relations: Willingness for Transition to Inter-Korean Relations Centered Around National Independence Led by North Korea

The North argued that the South should be held responsible for the current frozen inter-Korean relations and demanded that the current ROK government change its policy on the DPRK. The North regime showed a willingness to deploy a double-sided tactic combining a peace offensive with pressure on the ROK in 2017. Pyongyang put the most efforts in "crafting a measure to alleviate the risks of possible military

conflicts and war that still remain as real possibility between the two Koreas.” Key Resolve and Foal Eagle (KR/FE) military exercises in February and Ulchi-Focus Lens (UFG) in late August will likely determine the direction of inter-Korean relations and the U.S.-North Korea relations. It is no wonder that all the eyes are on the development of tri-lateral respond - South Korea, North Korea, and the U.S. - to ROK-US joint military exercise and military summit. The North will strongly demand the South and the U.S. to stop a joint military drill, but Seoul and Washington are more likely to maintain the status quo as scheduled. Under this scenario, North Korea will intensify the level of nuclear threats fulfilling the following statement that “we will continue to reinforce a preemptive strike capability so long as the U.S. and its follower hold on to their nuclear threats.” The ROK will find it hard to drive a strong impetus in pursuing policy on North Korea in the first half of 2017 since it cannot help but to pay a primary attention to stabilizing a tumultuous domestic situation. And this unstable political circumstance will likely to create an enough room for the DPRK to strengthen a peace offensive toward the ROK. The North regime will focus on the peace offensives by proposing inter-Korean military summit, national assembly summit, and joint meetings between party members and social organizations. It will also lead the initiative in inter-Korean relations by announcing its offensive stance on the development of inter-Korean relations, marking the 45th anniversary of the June 15th North - South Joint Declaration and the 10th anniversary of the October 4th North-South Declaration. Should a condition is created for the two Koreas to have a dialogue, a separated family reunion event could take place in honor of October 4th North-South Declaration and Korean thanks giving holiday.

Pyongyang’s policy stance on Seoul has neither shown that much of a difference when compared to the past, nor contains a seriously provocative contents since North Korea’s primary policy goal is to induce Trump’s policy on the DPRK in their favor. Therefore, North Korea’s policy toward South Korea would inevitably be placed in the back burner. The North regime is very likely to maintain its wait-and - see approach regarding inter-Korean relations in the first half of this year until the new



administration comes in on the southern part of the Korean Peninsula given the U.S. six-month-period in making policy on the North and unpredictability of domestic situation in South Korea. The DPRK will then decide the composition and intensity of threatening with fire warfare in policy toward the South in the second half of this year while considering the prospects of improving the U.S.-North Korea relations and the political situation in the ROK. ©KINU 2016

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