



## Online Series

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# Analysis of Kim Jong Un's 2019 New Year's Day Speech and Prospects for 2019

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On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 9:00 a.m., North Korea's state broadcaster, Korean Central Television (KCTV), aired Chairman Kim Jong Un's 2019 New Year's Day speech. The defining characteristic of the New Year's address was the spirit of dialogue and cooperation that makes up a significant portion of the speech. The call for internal struggle and outward aggression that usually marked North Korea's previous New Year's Day speeches was no longer dominant. The 2019 speech clarified Kim's commitment to advance to the next level the regime's relations with Washington and Seoul. The message to the domestic population focused on reasonable reforms instead of military propaganda and instigation. The key words of the New Year's remarks were economic development, peace and normalization of international relations. In fact, what underlies the 2019 address appears to be Pyongyang's determination to seek economic development through peace-building efforts and to synchronously pursue economic development and peace.

What is noticeable in the speech is that Kim Jong Un specifically mentioned his unwavering and rock-solid commitment to implementing the June 12 agreement signed between the U.S. and the DPRK as well as "complete denuclearization." Chairman Kim showed his willingness and

enthusiasm for meeting President Trump again and forging new bilateral ties with Washington. The 35-year-old supreme leader of the DPRK seemed resolute on improving relations further without undermining the “trust” built under the recent U.S.-DPRK agreement. However, he also implied that Pyongyang may seek “a new path” if Washington follows the path of one-sided coercion and sticks with sanctions and pressure. In addition, Mr. Kim made a few bold suggestions for the advancement of inter-Korean relations that included the expansion of inter-Korean arms control, multilateral negotiations to transform the armistice agreement into a peace regime, the resumption of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Kungang Tourist Zone projects. These proposals are highly likely to emerge, in line with the progress of the U.S.-North Korea relations, as the most pressing agenda on the Korean Peninsula in 2019.

The 2019 New Year’s speech can be seen as Pyongyang’s signal that it is now ready to resume negotiations after having completed silent preparations over the last 3 months. If Washington responds positively, the two sides are likely to accelerate to revive U.S.-DPRK bilateral negotiations and their second summit. If things go smoothly to a second Trump-Kim summit in January or February 2019, inter-Korean dialogue will gain traction to intensify arms control and further economic exchange and cooperation projects. A progress between North Korea and the U.S. could make the resumption of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Kungang Tourist Zone feasible and may eventually facilitate their reopening as early as the first half of 2019. There is also the potential for renewed military agreements between the two Koreas since the North Korean regime may attempt to utilize its military confidence-building efforts with South Korea in showing the international community its commitment to peace.

In addition, there is a good chance that the DPRK will create a new momentum for furthering relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK) the U.S. by April—the month of two one-year anniversaries: the New Strategic Line’s adoption on April 20 and the Panmunjeom Declaration on April 27. For the North, April 2019 will be when the one-year outcomes of Kim’s “audacious decision” in 2018 are evaluated. The absence of visible and tangible results will represent a burden to the regime in its

governing ability. In this context, if Pyongyang and Washington manage to produce positive results on the negotiation table in the first quarter of 2019, Kim Jong Un may take his visit to Seoul as an opportunity to publicize the two Koreas' strengthened military agreement and resumed economic cooperation.

The 2019 New Year's Day speech was similar to that of 2018 in terms of careful attention given to the presentation's style and image. Aware of the international spotlight drawn to its annual address, the North probably went to great lengths to create the image of a gentle, stable and benevolent leader. It is noticeable in the way that camera follows Kim walking to his office in the Party Headquarters, where the speech was delivered, and descending the staircase to his office with key aids Kim Yo-Jong, First Deputy Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), Jo Yong-Won, Deputy Director of the Organization and Guidance Department of the WPK, and Kim Chang-son, Director of the State Affairs Commission. Also importantly, Kim delivered the remarks sitting on an armchair, instead of the usual podium, against the backdrop of bookshelves in a warmly-lit room.

### **Shift in Narrative Structure of Speech: from Tension, Struggle and Mobilization to Stability, Inclusion and Reform**

Both the atmosphere and contents of the 2019 New Year's Day speech are quite distinguishable from previous ones. It is clear that the remarks aim to ease tensions at home and abroad. After the young Kim took office, the New Year address had followed the same narrative structure in recent years: 1) reminding of crises at home and abroad, 2) stressing the need to fight outside enemies, 3) provoking tension and wariness among North Koreans, 4) emphasizing the need for internal solidarity and class and ideological warfare, and 5) urging to work with singular resolve (on all projects, including economic ones) and such way of working (the great upsurge and revolutionary full-scale attacks). Compared to the past, belligerent and inflammatory rhetoric and mood substantially declined in this year's New Year

speech. Instead, Chairman Kim emphasized practicality and reasonable reform to the domestic audience and signaled his willingness for inclusive negotiations to the global audience.

To sum up, the 2019 New Year's Day address aimed at less tension and more inclusion at home and abroad in addition to pursuing (economic) reform. Previous speeches, in contrast, stressed the need for escalating more tensions and instigating struggles at home and abroad, mobilizing people and resources for revolution. Kim's speech writers appear to use a style of relatively indirect and mild rhetoric that is mindful of the keen attention of the outside world surrounding this year's annual New Year's address. Such change could be interpreted as that Pyongyang has become cognizant of the need to be seen as a normal state leaving behind an aggressive and combative image of the past, following political developments in 2018 and growing contact with the international community.

### **June 12 Agreement and Firm Determination to Implement Complete Denuclearization**

What stands out the most in North Korea's 2019 year-opening remarks is Kim's affirmation of his unwavering position on the June 12 Agreement signed between Washington and Pyongyang and his firm determination for its implementation. In the speech, he said "moving forward to complete denuclearization is an unwavering stance of our Party and the government of the Republic as well as my strong determination" and "we will no longer produce, test, use or spread nuclear weapons." This statement can be interpreted as an important political speech act that enhances the regime's credibility on its willingness for implementation of complete denuclearization.

In fact, it is the first time that the DPRK's current leader directly mentioned "denuclearization" since he took office. North Korea's preemptive nuclear "freeze" was fleshed out with Chairman Kim's clear declaration against nuclear production, testing, use and proliferation. Kim Jong Un believes that his regime has already taken

several progressive implementation measures, followed by declaring a nuclear freeze, such as halting nuclear and missile tests, destroying the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site, and promising non-proliferation in North Korea's statute and memorandum. North Korea sees denuclearization consisting of two phases: 1) nuclear freeze (the confidence-building phase) and 2) nuclear abolition (the execution phase in full scale). The 2019 New Year's speech reaffirmed North Korea's stance that it will finalize the freeze and enforce denuclearization in full scale only after Washington takes corresponding actions for what the North has already done.

### **Expression of Trust in Trump and Strong Will to Improve DPRK-U.S. Ties**

In the message to the U.S., Kim Jong Un used various rhetoric to express his willingness to advance the U.S.-North Korea relations. He repeatedly conveyed his will and determination to improve the U.S.-DPRK relations, with expressions including "clearer and more ground-breaking measures," "advance at an excellent and rapid pace," "...has no intention to carry around hostile relations of the past and has willingness to move on to build new relations that meet people's desire and the demand of the times for development by putting an end to the past hostility as soon as possible," and "a mutually beneficial final destination." Also importantly, he argued that the U.S.-DPRK ties could make ground-breaking progress once both sides decide to set their minds to it, as illustrated by the recent developments in inter-Korean relations. By mentioning progress in inter-Korean relations as a precedent for the betterment of Washington-Pyeongyang relations, Kim tried to convince the Trump administration that his boldness and sincerity shown with Seoul could also be reflected in the U.S.-DPRK ties. All these expressions show North Korea's strong desire to promote bilateral ties with the U.S.

Against this backdrop, it is noteworthy that Kim stressed his "trust" in President Trump and the importance for their shared understanding. Pyongyang has demonstrated a strong determination for the advancement of the U.S.-DPRK ties and negotiation by repeatedly reminding of the June 12 Agreement and its strong

trust in the American president. In the speech, Kim Jong Un said that he was prepared to meet with his American counterpart, and if it happens, he “will strive to produce outcomes that the international community will welcome” and “wants to believe that the meetings will make good results.” Such remarks can be understood as Kim revealing his hopes for a U.S.-DPRK summit and his readiness for it. Taking those into accounts, the two sides are likely to accelerate to resume a bilateral negotiation around the beginning of this year. In this regard, Kim Jong Un’s mention of “seeking new ways” hardly implies a return to the “byungjin line,” the simultaneous pursuit of economic development and a nuclear program, or other counterproductive policy regressions, since those are “ways of the past,” not “new ways.” Therefore, the “new ways” may be best interpreted as the DPRK rhetorically making a case for a later possibility hinting that it does not need to follow the June 12 Agreement if the Trump administration takes no corresponding actions.

### **De Facto Declaration of Non-Aggression and Proposal to Expand Inter-Korean Arms Control**

In the 2019 New Year address, North Korea’s supreme leader defined the Panmunjeom Declaration, Pyeongyang Declaration and the Military Agreement with South Korea as “de facto declaration of non-aggression.” By replicating Seoul’s view of the agreements, Chairman Kim proved a strong bond between the two Koreas. Stressing the need to fundamentally resolve military hostility with Seoul, he proposed to expand the jurisdiction of the 2018 agreement on preventing conflicts on land, sea and air to the entire peninsula. This suggestion may facilitate inter-Korean operational arms control in an early stage expanded to the entire peninsula and ultimately, to evolve into a discussion on strategic arms control.

Arms control is one of the areas that North Korea can actively cooperate on. In fact, it is one of the biggest achievements of advancement of inter-Korean ties in 2018 as well as a key milestone that demonstrates to the international community the two side’s commitments to alleviating military threats and promoting

peace. The overtures laid out in this New Year's Day speech may reflect a mutual understanding between the two Koreas, agreed upon in the 2018 Military Agreement. Therefore, if conditions are met, Seoul and Pyeongyang are likely to start active discussions on the subject of arms control and reach an agreement. Relieving military tension is an indirect means for the DPRK regime to show its commitment to denuclearization, and has potential to serve as an exemplary model for the implementation of other agreements. Therefore, a successful relaxation of the tension may help create an atmosphere for the UN Security Council (UNSC) to lift sanctions against North Korea.

In the January 1<sup>st</sup> speech, Kim Jong Un also mentioned “our claim” to “cease joint military exercises with a foreign power and [the foreign power’s] sending of strategic assets.” However, recent diplomatic dialogues between Pyeongyang and Washington and the arms control process of the two Koreas have already restrained South Korea and the U.S. from joint military exercises and deployment of U.S. military strategic assets, which might provoke the Kim regime. Therefore, Kim’s “claim” at the end of the speech could best be viewed not as a precondition for dialogue or negotiation but as its stance with the hope of making such cessations permanent.

### **Outline of DPRK’s Proposal on Peace Process: Multilateral Negotiation to Transform the Armistice Agreement into a Peace Regime**

The 2019 New Year’s speech included a proposal for multilateral negotiation that would transform the armistice agreement into a peace regime, which is highly likely to emerge as the most important item for this year’s agenda between the two Koreas and the DRPK and the U.S. “Based on close collaboration with other parties of the armistice agreement, we should actively pursue multilateral negotiation to transform the armistice agreement on the Korean Peninsula into a peace regime so as to build a substantial foundation for a permanent peace,” Kim Jong Un said in a televised speech. This appears to be the first time that North Korea’s ruler mentioned the peace process. Here, a peace regime is a broad and comprehensive

concept that includes an official declaration of the end of the Korean War, negotiations to sign a peace treaty, the conclusion of a peace treaty, a guarantee of the regime's security and arms control. It is noteworthy that he directly mentioned "a peace regime," a term rarely used in the North.

Traditionally, North Korea saw a peace treaty an issue that needs to be dealt with between Pyongyang and Washington; it adamantly refused to acknowledge Seoul as a party. Hence, this shift represents a dramatic departure from the past that Kim now acknowledges a matter of peace treaty subject to multilateral negotiations among the signatories of the armistice agreement. This may indicate North Korea officially endorsing the idea of a three- or four-party declaration to end the Korean War, which the two Koreas specified in the Panmunjeom Declaration. In the meantime, the multilateral negotiation framework is highly likely to be North Korea's attempt to reduce uncertainty in bilateral negotiations with the U.S. and subsequent implementation. It is also highly probable that Kim Jong Un considered Beijing's possible participation in multilateral talks, when he specified "signatories of the armistice agreement" in the speech.

It is worthy following up on whether Pyongyang this year makes a peace regime and multilateral negotiation as a key agenda, given that they were suggested by the statements of its supreme leader. The Kim regime possibly chose a peace regime as a negotiation strategy with Washington. It is because making the establishment of a peace regime on the peninsula as an agenda, which involves a comprehensive process, may be more useful in North Korea's negotiation with the U.S. than being confined to specific goals such as the end of the war declaration. The key questions are on the priorities that Pyongyang gives in the process of turning the armistice into a peace regime. New debates may arise on whether the DPRK's previous overture for the end-of-the war declaration still remains valid or the North would want to directly move on to the negotiation over a peace treaty.



## **Proposal to Resume Kaesong and Mt. Kungang Projects as a Bypass of International Sanctions**

In his message to South Korea, Kim Jong Un stated his willingness to resume the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Kungang Tourist Zone “without any precondition or return.” Pyeongyang has requested to restart the two projects, arguing that South Korea’s previous administration unilaterally put a halt on the project independent of UNSC sanctions, which were enforced as a result of North Korea’s advancement in nuclear and missile development. For Seoul, however, the two projects became effectively relevant to the UNSC sanctions as the sanctions had gotten tougher over time. The ROK cannot make decisions without taking into account Washington–Pyeongyang talks and the DPRK’s denuclearization progress. Therefore, under the current circumstance, Kim’s proposal in the 2019 New Year’s Day speech may represent a tricky decision for South Korea to make to some extent.

Kim Jong Un called for the two projects’ resumption for two reasons. First, he might be seeking a breakthrough from the sanctions, not through new economic cooperation projects, but by the resumption of already existing projects. Second, he may see inter-Korean cooperation as a way-out because lifting the sanctions imposed by the UNSC and U.S. usually takes time and occurs in a gradual manner. Moreover, Pyeongyang has never suggested specific terms or proposals concerning the resumption of the Kaesong Industrial Complex or Mt. Kungang Tourist Zone projects. Therefore, “without any precondition or return” can be interpreted as the regime’s message that it would not make an issue out of previous confiscation or other legal actions.

## **Message to North Koreans: Inflammatory Belligerence Decreased, Tolerant People-centeredness Increased**

In his first official speech of 2019, Kim Jong Un used substantially toned-down and restrained rhetoric, seemingly inclusive in discussing domestic matters. For example, he adopted a mild and embracing tone when mentioning non-socialist struggles: “we should start a strong breeze to firmly encourage

socialist lifestyles and a noble moral spirit in order to prevent immoral and anti-cultural trends that are against our people's sentiment and common understanding; and with virtue we should develop our society into a big, harmonious family." This contrasts with the rough, provocative rhetoric of the past that included class strife, schemes by impure and hostile elements, a pressure on reactionary culture of bourgeois, and urgent struggles. This shift is probably a rhetorical choice to create the image of a gentle leader, aware of the huge international attention that the televised speech would receive at home and abroad.

Belligerence was diminished in his message to the military as well. In his remarks on People's Army for Internal Affairs and the Worker-Peasant Red Guards, Kim Jong Un refrained from using political and incendiary terms such as class struggle and war against impure and hostile elements. Instead, he stressed the increased military readiness as defined very narrowly. This watered-down approach is especially visible in his words on North Korean "people," on which he emphasized "politics of love and trust." In the past, key words on this topic included "strengthening the entire Party's political ideology," "revolutionary climate across the Party," "ties of kinship" and "strengthening of the Party's guidance." This year, the 35-year-old leader talked about "prioritizing people's interest," "serve people with self-sacrifice" and "our socialist home." In addition, dropping the old view of literature and art as a tool of political struggles, he noted the need for literature and art that fit the reality and the people's demands.

### **Emphasis on Practical Approach to Economy Rather than Propaganda and Mobilization**

As for the economy, Kim's message in the 2019 New Year's speech is that the regime has made substantial achievements in the economy despite international sanctions and that it would do its utmost to consolidate economic self-reliance and stimulate ordinary people's economy, stepping up efforts for executing its strategic goals.

However, interesting changes can be observed from several aspects that

have one thing in common—an emphasis on practicality. This is in line with the flow of changes occurring in the DPRK economy under Kim Jong Un. Given so, it appears that the Kim regime will continue to focus on self-reliance under the harsh reality in the face of sanctions. Pyongyang, however, may now try to tackle economic difficulty by enhancing economic efficiency with greater practicality.

### **Economic Reform Continued: Stimulating Production by Enterprises and Raising Managerial Efficiency**

Building on the “socialist system of responsible business operation” in last year’s New Year’s speech, Kim’s first official remarks of 2019 took one step further. This year is likely to see more authority given to the cabinet and organizational reshuffle in government agencies in charge of pricing, financial sector, and government finance. Concrete and practical reforms are expected in these matters. However, Chairman Kim urged the cabinet and other competent institutions to increase efforts for creating an environment that boosts the production and managerial efficiency of enterprises. Obviously, he added a condition on that goal, “in accordance with socialist economic principles.” However, the condition appears no more than just a customary rhetoric considering how institutional frameworks on businesses have changed under the young Kim’s leadership. He might be encouraging the cabinet to drive innovation to make enterprises more efficient in production and management.

In fact, what is worthy of the attention is that Kim also stressed the war industry’s contribution to economic development and enhancement of people’s life. In the 2018 New Year’s Day speech, the Chairman argued that the war industry spurred economic development and helped improve people’s life. This year, he emphasized that the industry will provide active support to economic development. Having declared “the completion of nuclear might” in 2017, Pyongyang may now want to show that its focus is on civilian industry. Or, it may be accelerating the transformation of its war industry into civilian areas. Other possible options of the

DPRK's economic reform include making the military hand over the control of trade to the cabinet. It may also expand the cabinet's organizations and increase its financing capacity.

### Measures to Facilitate the Success of Agricultural Reform

In regard to agriculture, instead of simply calling for production boost, Kim Jong Un emphasized practical measures to encourage farmers to produce more, demanding “to respect individual farm members’ opinion and interest and accurately realize the demand of socialist distribution principles.” This may be an attempt to save Kim’s efforts for agricultural reforms. So far, the reforms have produced little positive outcome as they have failed to guarantee the interests of cooperative farm members under the Kim Jong Un era. In addition, “encouraging individual farmers’ livestock farming as a side job” is worth noticing in terms of promoting the farmers’ desire to work. ©KINU 2019

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