

Revenge politics to raise the ghost of the elite pro-nuclear consensus

Tuesday 21 February 2023, by [YAMANAKA Karen](#) (Date first published: 7 February 2023).

The Sixth Enlarged Plenary Meeting of the Eighth Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) was held from December 26 to 31 last year. December 26 was the day when the unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) of South and North Korea crossed into each other's countries.

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At the beginning of the same month, South Korea had already fired missiles to North Korea for the first time since the 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement in retaliation for North Korea. At the conference, ethno-nationalist Kim Jong-un said about the current international situation as manifested in the war in Ukraine:

The structure of international relations has been apparently shifted to a "new Cold War" system and a push for multipolarization is further expedited." [1]

He identified the current situation as the "new Cold War." And in the situation in the "new Cold War", he criticized the multilateral alliances in East Asia centered on the US. Then he defined South Korea as a "principal enemy". About two weeks later, on January 13, the Korean Central News Agency published an article of Kim Tong-myong, a researcher of the Society for International Politics Study. The article criticizes Japan-France Summit Meeting held on January 9 by saying:

It is the sinister intention of NATO stretching its tentacles to the Asia-Pacific region to put pressure on China in an all-round way by justifying its advance into the Asia-Pacific region under various pretexts and steadily expanding its influence over the region.

Pyongyang publicly warned NATO's involvement in Asia. The article also insisted:

Japan plays the role of a guide introducing NATO, a legacy of the Cold War.

On the other hand, the defense chiefs of the US and South Korea vowed to expand military drills and boost nuclear deterrence planning to counter North Korea's weapons development on January 31, the day when the WPK meeting ended. [2] The two countries will hold nuclear tabletop exercises in February this year in a scenario of North Korean nuclear attacks for their joint nuclear planning.

A hotbed of nuclear tension that periodically escalates

North Korea has been developing a program to miniaturize nuclear weapons. And the Korean peninsula is also a hotbed of nuclear tension that periodically escalates although international attention is focused on Ukraine and Taiwan [3]. The Korean peninsula shares land or sea borders with China, Russia and Japan, while the US has established its largest network of overseas military bases there. Last December, the International Viewpoint article “The geopolitics of crisis” of Pierre Rousset pointed out the following two points related to the situation of the Korean Peninsula until last November:

1. The Korean peninsula is a hotbed of nuclear tension that periodically escalates.
2. The alternation between moments of relaxation or tension often relates to factors “internal” to the peninsula and not, or not much, to the geopolitics of the great powers.

The state of crisis manifested itself last year in an unprecedented number of ballistic missiles launches by North Korea, particularly in October-November. [3] However, from November last year to January this year, another principal factor “internal” surfaced. It was unprecedented hardline approaches toward North Korea of South Korea which was defined as “principal enemy” by North.

Repeated retaliatory actions between North and South Korea

The following are the retaliatory actions taken by North and South Korea between November and December last year.

1. In response to North launches of November 2, South Korea fired 3 test missiles to North Korea across the Northern Limit Line (NLL) [4] for the first time since the signing of the 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement. The retaliatory action was made while the US B-1B aircraft took part in the allies’ Vigilant Storm exercise in the skies over the Korean Peninsula.
2. On December 18, North Korea launched a medium-range ballistic missile and released satellite photos of the South Korean cities of Seoul and Incheon [5] Then its state media boasted of success toward developing its first military spy satellite. In response to it, after three days, South Korea released a clearer photograph of the Kim Il Sung Square area in Pyongyang taken by the medium-sized satellite “National Satellite-1”.
3. On December 26, five North Korea unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) crossed into South Korea and South Korea responded by scrambling jets and attack helicopters. [6] As part of its response, the South Korea military also sent UAVs into the North to photograph its military installations.

The current Korean crisis will go back a long time from the standpoint of the military programs developed by North Korea. But it should be noted that South Korea’s hardline approaches toward North Korea last year are unusual. And the unprecedented retaliatory actions of South Korea were followed by a series of presidential remarks which were also unprecedentedly extreme and provocative.

“Eye-for-an-Eye” revenge politics of Yun Seok-yeol

After a series of retaliatory actions against North Korea last year, South Korean President Yun Seok-

yeol instructed officials on December 28 to firmly retaliate against any North Korean provocations without having fears just because the North has nuclear weapons. [7]

And on December 29, he called on officials to always be fully prepared for war in a visit to the Agency for Defense Development (ADD) in Daejeon. He said [8]:

Our military must become a powerful one that instills impenetrable fear in our enemy and firm confidence in our people.

In order for us to attain peace, we must make overwhelmingly superior war preparations.

Last year, Yun has spoken and actually conducted his “Eye-for-an-Eye” revenge politics. He takes the position that the country’s actions are all correct even if its retaliatory measures violate the Korean Armistice Agreement and other inter-Korean agreements. These remarks and actions obviously went beyond South Korea’s conservative positions in the past.

North and South Korea pushing ahead with ICBM development

First of all, it is a violation of the Armistice Agreement to fly unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) over the Military Demarcation Line (MDL). Also, flying a manned aircraft for survey to the vicinity of the MDL meant a flight to an area designated as no-fly zones. It was also a violation of the September 19 Military Agreement which was concluded by former South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un. While both South and North Korea have repeated violations of the Korean Armistice Agreement and other inter-Korean agreements, the countries are pushing ahead with ICBM development. Currently Russia, the US, China, France, India, the UK, Israel, and North Korea are the only countries known to have operational ICBMs. Meanwhile South Korea is about to join one of those countries by developing solid-fuel space vehicles that can be diverted to ICBMs at any time for “space development”. On December 15 last year, the North’s Academy of Defense Science succeeded in the “static firing test of high-thrust solid-fuel motor” with a thrust of 140 ton-force at the Sohae Satellite Launching Ground. [9] On the other hand, South Korea’s National Defense Science Institute successfully conducts test flight of solid-fuel space vehicle on December 30, nine months after its first test of the homegrown rocket. [10] The test flight was conducted the day after the Yun Seok-yeol’s unprecedented “Eye-for-an-Eye” remarks. In response to that, North Korea also conducted unusual military actions immediately after the test flight: launching of ballistic missiles to Japan Sea before and after the New Year.

South Korea seeks independent nuclear armament

The runaway train of Yun Seok-yeol cannot be stopped. On January 11, he said at a policy briefing that Seoul could either build nuclear weapons or have them redeployed to the country to counter Pyongyang. [11] This marked the first time a South Korean president had mentioned the nuclear weapons since the US withdrew them from the Korean Peninsula in 1991. While South Korea has discussed over the years about extended deterrence under the US-South Korea alliance, conventional governments have ruled out the possibility of the redeployment of US nuclear weapons or independent nuclear armament. But Yun began to take the highly unusual step toward independent nuclear armament. On the other hand, Kim Jong-un has continued to promote

development of ballistic missiles as the main delivery vehicles of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction from 2012 with provocative words such as “nuclear response in unexpected situation at any time”. [12]

Since 2018, Kim Jong-un had selected conflict instead of reconciliation with South Korea, accelerating his dictatorship. In recent years, top leaders of both North and South Korea have been talking too lightly about war and nuclear weapons. Especially recently, Yun Seok-yeol’s unprecedented hard line position will foreshadow an unexpected crisis situation with the nuclear arms race as another principal factor “internal”, which is opposite to the abolition of nuclear weapons. It also may raise the ghost of the pro-nuclear consensus among the elites which had already prevailed in other East Asian countries. Regardless of the energy output the nuclear tests, heightened and intensified regional tensions in this area will endanger geopolitical stability which may trigger unexpected nuclear weapons also in other parts of the world. Even with a small nuclear weapon explosion, the humanitarian impact on the region’s complex geopolitical relations is enormous.

KAREN YAMANAKA

Footnotes

[1] Rodong Sinmun, 1 January 2023, “Report on 6th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of 8th WPK Central Committee.” Kim Jong-un referred to another Cold War for the first time at the second-day sitting of the 5th Session of the 14th Supreme People’s Assembly which was held on 29 September 2021 in the context of “neo-Cold War” in which the structure of the international relations has been reduced (Rodong Sinmun, 30 September 2021, “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Historic Policy Speech “On the Orientation of Present Struggle for a Fresh Development of Socialist Construction”). On the other hand, at the 6th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of 8th WPK of last year, Kim Jong-un used another word “new Cold War” as a news system of the structure of international relations.

[2] Hyonhee Shin, Reuters, 31 January 2023, “Defence chiefs of U.S., S.Korea vow to step up drills to counter North”

[3] Pierre Rousset, IVP, 11 December 2022, “The geopolitics of crisis”

[4] Yonhap News Agency, 2 November 2022, “(5th LD) N. Korea’s missile flies across NLL for 1st time; S. Korea sends missiles northward in its show of force”

[5] Yonhap News Agency, 19 December 2022, “(3rd LD) N. Korea says it conducted ‘important’ test for developing reconnaissance satellite”

[6] BBC News, 26 December 2022, “North Korean drone reaches north of Seoul”

[7] Yonhap News Agency, 22 December 2022, “Yoon orders firm retaliation against N.K. provocations without fears of nuclear weapons”

[8] KoreanJoongAng Daily, 29 December 2022, “Yoon Suk-yeol calls for full preparation in case of

war in visit to defense agency”

[9] Rodong Sinmun, 16 December 2022, “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Guides Important Test of Strategic Significance”

[10] Yonhap News Agency, 30 December 2022, “S. Korea successfully conducts test flight of solid-fuel space vehicle: defense ministry”

[11] Christy Lee, Voice of America News, 18 January 2023, “Experts: South Korea Seeks Enhanced US Nuclear Assurances Against North Korea”

[12] Karen Yamanaka, IVP, 11 November 2022, “Geopolitical Instability Which May Cause Unexpected and Worldwide Nuclear Weapons Accidents”