

North and South Korea at a turning point after 70 years

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The situation on the Korean Peninsula has become more tense recently, with North Korea still conducting a series of missile tests from late last year into this year. Former US State Department official Robert I. Carlin and a nuclear scientist recognized the situation on the Korean peninsula as the most dangerous since 1950 in January this year. [1]

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The danger of war on the Korean peninsula is growing, and we have entered a transition era that will fundamentally change the relationship between North and South Korea. Over the past 70 years, the two countries have improved their relations through dialogue, even in times of crisis. In the last few years, however, this dialog has disappeared and the crises have become a routine. On November 24 last year, North Korea announced that it would completely abrogate the 2018 inter-Korean agreement to reduce tensions and restore all military activities. Currently, an accidental clash between North and South Korea could lead to a resumption of the cease-fired Korean War.

Conference held amid crisis since ceasefire

Last September, without prior notice, North Korea enshrined its “advanced nuclear weapons” policy in its constitution. The Supreme People’s Assembly [2] on January 15 focused on what military policies the country will pursue as it continues to accelerate its nuclear and missile programs to achieve its five-year national defense plan, now in its fourth year of implementation. In his January 15 speech to the Supreme People’s Assembly, Kim Jong-un expressed his intention to occupy South Korea. He described South Korea as “the most hostile state and unchangeable principal enemy” and enshrined it in the constitution. He also clarified that the phrase “independence, peaceful reunification and great national unity” would be deleted from the constitution. The final conclusion was that unification with South Korea was no longer possible for North Korea.

In response, Kim Jong-un said that South Koreans should no longer be called compatriots and called for an end to all contact between North and South Korea by destroying reunification monuments in Pyongyang. It is a more concrete expression of the decision of the 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th WPK Central Committee held last December 26-30 to regard relations with South Korea not as inter-ethnic relations but as state-to-state relations, even hostile state-to-state relations.

Declaration of war against the “hostile state”

Not only that, but Kim Jong-un has been spewing declaration-level language toward South Korea. Kim Jong-un said that the danger of the outbreak of a war through expansion by physical conflict with the Republic of Korea (ROK) [3], the country’s main enemy, has greatly increased and reached a dangerous stage, and that if a war breaks out, the ROK will be completely occupied, leveled and incorporated into the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) [4].

These words of North Korea’s supreme leader nullify the “peaceful reunification” that has been handed down since the time of Kim Il-sung and suggest reunification by force. They also represent a major change from Kim Il-sung’s October 1980 proposal for founding “the Democratic Federal Republic of Koryo (DFRK)”, which calls for unification under “one nation, one state, two institutions and two governments”. This marks a critical turning point in the nearly 70 years since the division of North and South Korea. As if to symbolize this, recent SNS letters written by North Koreans are so full of slanderous words against “ROK” that they make us dizzy. This atmosphere is quite different from the traditional one: “uri minjok kiri” (achieving unification by the Koreans themselves).

Broadcasting stopped after 74 years

The Supreme People’s Assembly also decided to abolish three organizations responsible for dialogue and exchanges with South Korea, including the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK), after declaring war on the “enemy state”. In addition, the organizations that had existed for the improvement of inter-Korean relations and peaceful reunification, such as the All-Korean Committee for Implementation of the June 15 Joint Declaration, which was set up in response to the 2000 inter-Korean summit, have all been reorganized.

On January 12, three days before Kim Jong-un’s statement, the Pyongyang Broadcasting Station (PBS), a propaganda and incitement broadcast mainly for South Koreans, suddenly stopped broadcasting for the first time in 74 years. This incident symbolizes a major turning point since the division of North and South Korea. The PBS is characterized by its call to “fellow countrymen” and the fact that it targets overseas Koreans living in South Korea and other countries. [5] In addition to the suspension of the PBS broadcast, several propaganda sites against South Korea, including the Pyongyang Broadcasting Station (PBS) website, are no longer available. The “VOH: Voice of Hope”, ostensibly a “nonpartisan civilian station” that was in fact operated by the CPRK, was also abolished with the elimination of the CPRK. And the “Unified News”, which had been described as a “nonpartisan representative newspaper”, also ceased publication after its January 6 issue.

Unusual events in a crisis and stable China-North Korea relations

As the crisis situation on the Korean peninsula continues, a surprising event has occurred. Kim Jong-un sent a message of sympathy to Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida over a powerful earthquake that struck central Japan on January 1 of this year.

In the March-11 earthquake of 2011, only a sympathy message was sent from the Red Cross Society of North Korea to the Japanese Red Cross Society. It is also the first time that a North Korean leader has sent a message to the Japanese prime minister. It is possible that Pyongyang, in response to the low approval ratings of Japan’s Kishida cabinet, has begun to push the Japanese government toward progress in Japan-North Korea relations. [6] The intent cannot be determined at this time, but should

be judged in conjunction with future trends.

China-North Korea relations have been stable since March 2018, when North Korea curbed its nuclear tests and Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping held their first summit. The *Rodong Sinmun* of January 6 this year carried a congratulatory message between the leaders of China and North Korea. [7] Both countries have designated this year as the “China-North Korea year of good will” to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations and reaffirm their friendly relations.

Return to “socialism”

Nevertheless, the historical distrust of China among ethnic Koreans is significant. [8] This is due to China’s long history of dark oppression against Korea, which goes back hundreds of years. It is different in character from the history of Japan’s 36-year colonial rule of the Korean peninsula.

Ostensibly, China is a friendly country to North Korea. In reality, however, the Korean people’s feelings toward China are complex. Ethnic minorities oppressed by the Chinese government in recent years include Chinese Koreans living in the border region with North Korea. In particular, the Chinese government’s policy of language suppression has been strongly criticized by Koreans living not only in China but also abroad. And many Chinese Koreans lost their lives during the Cultural Revolution on suspicion of espionage. North Korea may not be a true friend of China. And the country may only pay ostensible lip service to North Korea’s push for a return to “socialism”.

Since the collapse of the 2019 North Korea-US summit in Hanoi, North Korea has been pushing ahead with its return to “socialism”. The country is also crying out for a return to “communism”, a slogan increasingly used to control the population. Its political orientation is the exact opposite of democratization. Under these circumstances, Kim Jong-un formalized the “two Koreas” policy. At the same time, he formalized South Korea as the “principal enemy” and a belligerent. The country is pursuing further nuclear development as it advances its nuclear and missile programs. The overall upgrading of nuclear and missile weapons in North Korea will continue in the future.

In this situation, Japan is trying to develop an underground shelter in the capital in case of a missile attack. [9] Military tensions of an unprecedented nature are permeating the public sphere in East Asia. The Kim Jong-un regime, which is tightening its “socialist” control, is expected to use these tensions to further tighten its domestic control.

This year means a lot to North Korea this year. *Rodong Sinmun* reported that Putin expressed his willingness to visit North Korea “at an early date” on January 21. And also with the US presidential election in November and the South Korean parliamentary elections in April, the diplomatic environment will change significantly going forward. Both the North and South Korean governments have also taken a hard line, referring to nuclear weapons rather than conventional weapons. This has given the future escalation of tensions between North and South Korea a different meaning than in the past. And this escalation of tensions may make the East Asian region more tense than ever. In this sense, this spring’s joint US-South Korean military exercises will have a different character from conventional ones.

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Footnotes

[1] Robert I. Carlin and Siegfried S. Hecker, 38 North, 11 January 2024 “Is Kim Jong Un Preparing for War?”

[2] North Korea’s Supreme People’s Assembly meets once or twice a year to decide on the country’s budget, amendments to laws, and personnel matters for state institutions.

[3] Official name of South Korea.

[4] Official name of North Korea.

[5] There are roughly two North Korean broadcasts that can be heard in East Asia: the Pyongyang Broadcasting Station (PBS) and the Korean Central Broadcasting Station (KCBS). The former is an “all-Korea” service aimed primarily at South Koreans and ethnic Koreans, and the latter is the main full-service domestic radio network.

[6] According to ANN’s poll conducted on January 20 and 21, those who said they “support” Kishida’s cabinet decreased 0.9 points from last month to 20.4%, the lowest percentage since the inauguration of the administration. ANN: All-Nippon News Network.

[7] The *Rodong Sinmun* is a North Korean newspaper that serves as the newspaper of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK).

[8] Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo wrote in his memoir that Kim Jong-un told him in 2018 that he needed US forces in South Korea to protect himself from China. The present writer will never condone the presence of the US troops in South Korea. But it will reflect the ethnic sentiment of the Korean people to some extent regardless of the truth of that remarks. See Mike Pompeo, *Never Give an Inch, Fighting for the America I Love*, Broadside Books, 2024, 61-62.

[9] *Yomiuri Japan News*, 25 January 2024, “Tokyo Set to Build Underground Shelter in Event of Missile Attack”.