

Implications of the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea and Prospects for North Korea in 2020

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Chairman Kim Jong Un notably did not give a New Year's address in January 2020. While this was exceptional, there are several possible reasons behind this decision. Formally, Plenary Meetings of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) have been held during states of emergency. On December 31, Rodong Sinmun, the official newspaper of the WPK, reported on the outcomes of the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK, stating that party chairman Kim Jong Un "spoke for seven hours." There is a precedent for this, as Kim Il Sung did not give a New Year's address in 1987 following his administrative policy speech on December 30, 1986 to the Supreme People's Assembly. Similarly, the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee, which concluded on December 31, 2019, produced important policy decisions and extensive coverage of the relevant details left no need for a supplementary New Year's address. The Plenary Meeting presented the slogan for the new year and key agenda items for the political, social, economic, and military sectors. As these are typically included in New Year's addresses, North Korea may have deemed it unnecessary to repeat them. Further, in consideration of the current circumstances, bypassing the New Year's address may have been a strategic choice. Chairman Kim Jong Un's proposal to resume negotiations by the end of the year failed to result in meaningful action from either side. A standalone spotlight would have given unwelcome pressure to Kim Jong Un in his effort to save face. By passing the baton back to the US, North Korea may have wanted to reduce its political burden by showing that its future

behavior is based on collective, not unilateral, decisions. This handover can also be seen as a way to narrow the regime's win-set in its negotiations with the US. Internally, under sanctions that will continue into 2020, there may also be a desire to strengthen unity and "internal control." Given that the decisions made during the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK have apparently replaced this year's New Year's address, these decisions merit closer analysis and may be able to shed light on what we can expect from North Korea in the future.

Key Features and Implications

One fact to note is that the Plenary Meeting did not provide a timeline for denuclearization negotiations with the US. The lack of a timeline has two key implications. North Korea placed a self-imposed limit on its available options by setting a deadline of the end of 2019 to restart negotiations. In contrast, Kim's remarks at the Plenary Meeting increased the flexibility of North Korea to act in line with situational developments by not setting a fixed period within which the US must act. The decision not to impose such a deadline can also be interpreted as the regime's acceptance of the reality that its demand for the abolition of US hostile policy against North Korea will not be readily accepted. In this regard, North Korea has expressed its willingness to remedy the current situation by strengthening its internal potential and capabilities rather than pursuing economic development through changes in its external environment. North Korea's mention of potential threats the US poses aside from denuclearization is an acknowledgement of the wide scope of areas of conflict with the US. It also indicates that North Korea sees the US policy of pressure against it as a *fait accompli* and has turned to strengthening its internal capabilities as an alternative way of muddling through the current situation. The message from Pyongyang was that the US offer of a blueprint for economic development cannot be a sufficient bargaining incentive, which was also reflected in its statement emphasizing self-reliance without wishing for a "brilliant transformation." The prospects of the North Koreans have not been bright in the past. In the 2019 New Year's address, Kim Jong Un emphasized that North Korea would "pursue [its] own way of socialist economic construction regardless of how circumstances change." One difference from a year ago, however, is the more apparent recognition that the regime's confrontation with the US is likely to be prolonged.

The second noteworthy point to emerge from the Plenary Meeting is North Korea's passing of the baton to the US. The regime stated its willingness to adjust the strength of its future actions in accordance with the actions of the US. This is yet another reiteration of the regime's 2019 demands. In his 2019 New Year's address, Kim Jong Un said that North Korea

had already made "proactive efforts" and demanded that "the US respond with trustworthy measures and corresponding practical actions." We must examine why North Korea has decided to rehash its conditional proposals despite the low possibility that the US will accept any of its offers. Above all, such rehashing appears to be an attempt to redirect the criticism of the international community towards the US by emphasizing the logic that any possible future provocation from North Korea will only stem from the intransigence of the US. The North Koreans may also be aiming to secure as much time as possible to develop new weapons systems. At the Plenary Meeting, the regime said, "The longer the US stalls for time, the stronger North Korea's power will become." According to this logic, even if North Korea makes moves to develop strategic weapons, it becomes easier for North Korea to shift the blame of heightening tensions and delayed negotiations to the US. In other words, North Korea has reiterated its 2019 demands in an effort to preemptively sway public opinion so that the US cannot justify refusing to resume negotiations based on North Korea's weapons systems research and development.

It should be noted that keeping the door open to negotiations with the US will also be beneficial for North Korea in terms of securing time to develop new weapons. Existing negotiations have frozen North Korea's nuclear/ICBM tests, but not their research and development. It is therefore advantageous for North Korea to maintain the status quo in order to maximize the time for covert development. North Korea must have determined that the best course of action is to continuously pursue the development of a weapons system that poses an asymmetric threat to the ROK-US alliance, as the country must prepare for possible changes in the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula that may result from denuclearization negotiations. Despite declaring a "strategic change" in its policy focus toward economic development, North Korea has not renounced its pursuit of the weapons system development necessary to attain the goal of becoming a "global nuclear and military power" as declared at the 8th Military Industry Conference held from December 11 to 12, 2017. The Chosun Sinbo, which is run by Chongryon (the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan), published an article titled "Our Juche Weapons for Protecting the Nation and the People" on September 4, 2019. The article emphasized that as denuclearization talks with the US have begun, "the issue of maintaining a military balance without breaking it down is especially important, and the development of weapons to strengthen national defense is being pursued." However, North Korea will not feel the need to declare a return to the Byungjin Line policy of simultaneously developing nuclear weapons and the economy. The victory of the Byungjin Line was already proclaimed in April 2018 during the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee. A return to this policy would signify a self-admission of "incompletion." Instead, North Korea has deemed

it necessary to continue its discreet research and development efforts and take extra measures to manage any problems that could obstruct their progress.

The third main takeaway is that North Korea's demonstrated intent to conduct psychological warfare against the US in the face of a long-term confrontation makes the regime likely to subdivide its future steps. North Korea has shown confidence that the mere possibility of an ICBM test launch can create psychological pressure. North Korea's statement that it will "increase control of the surrounding political situation and give anxiety to its enemies" expresses the regime's intent to continue to place psychological pressure on countries concerned about ICBM test launches. Just as North Korea unexpectedly announced its plans to host the Plenary Meeting to pressure the US into complying with its year-end deadline, we can expect to see similar psychological efforts in the future. In this regard, North Korea may employ methods such as deliberately exposing its military activities to satellite images, delivering high-level warning messages issued by the General Staff Department, or holding military parades showcasing its new weapons on national holidays, such as Party Foundation Day or the Day of the Sun, the anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth. If North Korea aims to retain sufficient justification for its strategic provocations, it is possible that it will carefully maintain the status quo while plotting various courses of action, at least until the ROK-US joint military exercises are held in the spring.

It is also possible that North Korea will consider an attempt to show off new strategic weapons as its final option. The political gains from an ICBM test launch are insignificant, and can be offset by triggering ROK-US joint military exercises and US deployment of strategic assets. North Korea is therefore likely to exercise care in choosing its response to the ROK-US combined military exercises or the US's adoption of additional sanctions against North Korea's human rights abuses, cyber security threats, and illegal financial transactions. ICBM tests also fail to satisfy North Korea's interest in prolonging the status quo as they may adversely impede the development of weapons systems by prompting strengthened sanctions or weakening the regime's relations with China and Russia. North Korea's purposeful ambiguity about its future course of action also serves to avoid antagonizing President Trump. The moratorium on nuclear/ICBM test launches is regarded as a promise between the two leaders, and President Trump will consider an overt breach of the agreement as an attempt to disrupt his re-election campaign and therefore a personal challenge. Yet, while an ICBM test is a red line for Trump, the existence of such a red line increases the danger that North Korea may have greater confidence in its ability to conduct provocations below the threshold without invoking retaliation. This can be understood as the stability-instability paradox.

Fourth, North Korea has made it clear that it wants the US to take real action and not just resume dialogue. As an extension of its accusations that the US has not implemented the corresponding actions promised at the Singapore Summit, North Korea stressed that negotiations could only begin in earnest if the US can ensure institutionalized policy change. Attaching such “preconditions” ultimately raises the bar for commencing negotiations. This makes it more difficult for future denuclearization negotiations to proceed between North Korea and the US. North Korea reiterated its rights to live and develop throughout 2019 to emphasize its right to retain deterrence against the US and promote self-reliance. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that North Korea is expecting to engage in disarmament talks with the US as a nuclear weapons state. In this regard, it is worth remembering that when North Korea declared the suspension of further production and tests of nuclear weapons in 2019, it implied the freezing of future, not past, nuclear weapons. During the recent Plenary Meeting, the regime reiterated its nuclear deterrence capabilities and noted it had made previous efforts towards “international disarmament and nonproliferation.” Such claims are related to the regime’s pursuit of international recognition of North Korea as a responsible nuclear weapons state. This national identity will have a lasting effect on the country’s attitude toward future negotiations with the US.

North Korea is likely to demand that the US lift sanctions. The regime’s emphasis at the latest Plenary Meeting on “breaking through all the barriers” to counter sanctions by strengthening national capabilities reflects that the country’s economic problems now require more desperate measures. North Korea has been consistently demanding an easing of US sanctions, despite having insisted in its 2019 New Year’s address that “[it] can pursue development with [its] own strength and effort without any external help.” North Korea’s 2020 political slogan is “Break Through Head-on,” placing economic advancement at the frontline of the nation’s struggle. Although the regime revealed that its strategy to achieve this involves utilizing internal potential and a frugal attitude, external conditions will continue to play a crucial role. Of course, large-scale ideological campaigns promoting North Korea’s new slogan and rallies to implement the tasks decided at the Plenary Meeting will be useful in achieving internal unity. However, the tightening sanctions since 2017 have led to a reduction in North Korea’s exports as well as a decline in imports and overall industrial productivity. Although the country’s consumer goods sector can be sustained by the domestic market, most industrial sectors are likely to continue to suffer damages. The regime clearly acknowledged the difficulty of the current economic situation during the Plenary Meeting. Chairman Kim Jong Un’s re-emphasis on the need to properly direct state management and economic activities while rebuking Cabinet members for their shortcomings provides supporting evidence of the country’s difficulty in

managing its economic performance. It is also worth noting that Chairman Kim Jong Un's efforts to empower the Cabinet, which is responsible for economic management, could be a potential source of complaint for the existing political elites. Poor future performance and the subsequent blame game can unfavorably raise the level of internal tensions. If North Korea tries to externalize its internal discontent, the blame is quite likely to be directed at the US.

Prospects and Possible Future Responses

In 2020, in line with the logic that “strategic weapons systems guarantee sovereignty and the right to live,” North Korea may continue to test its new weapons as part of its efforts to strengthen its “self-reliant defense capabilities.” Chairman Kim will likely increase his engagement in military-related public activities, particularly as such moves tend to grab attention from the international community. Since North Korea recognizes the improbability of a radical change in US foreign policy and is preparing its own timeline for action, it is important for the ROK and the US to show tight cooperation in deterring North Korea and not leave any room for strategic misjudgment by the North. It will be necessary to maintain a state of readiness, especially during March and April, when tensions are likely to increase.

The current circumstances may lead to North Korea's increased dependence on China and Russia, without whose assistance it will be difficult for North Korea to maintain its “struggle-based self-sufficiency against sanctions.” The regime will accordingly aim to maintain strategic solidarity with these two countries. At the same time, North Korea is also likely to become more cautious in its strategic provocations amid growing dependence on these two great powers. In Russia and China’s draft resolution to the United Nations Security Council regarding the lifting of North Korean sanctions, the countries emphasized a two-year restraint on nuclear/ICBM tests. This can be interpreted as a desire for North Korea to exercise restraint so that the three countries can maintain collective pressure on the US. However, such pressure will place greater demands on the ROK to cooperate with the US and US allies on its North Korean policy. It is especially important to enhance international cooperation to strengthen export control so that North Korea's research and development efforts cannot easily achieve the mass production of new weapons systems.

A message to the ROK was conspicuously missing from the Plenary Meeting report. However, given the nature of the Plenary Meeting platform, it is not unusual for the ROK to have been ignored. It is inevitable that South Korea’s autonomy will be structurally constrained in consultations within the ROK-US alliance, including the joint working group on denuclearization.

As the ROK's role is thereby limited, North Korea may have judged it meaningless to make proposals similar to the suggestions in Kim Jong Un's 2019 New Year's address of its "willingness to reopen Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Kumgang tourism without any preconditions or costs." However, the ROK government must emphasize what was agreed upon at the 2017 ROK-US summit—"the active role of South Korea"—in dealing with Korean Peninsula issues. The South Korean government must continue its efforts to present various exit strategies and continually validate its position as a key party in resolving the issue of denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.