

Kim Jong-un's New Year's Speech; A Kinder, Gentler North Korea?

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A New Year's Day speech by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on improving the nation's economy and calling for better relations with South Korea has sparked a flurry of speculation that Pyongyang is planning a shift in direction in 2013. Is economic reform coming to North Korea? Are relations between North and South about to undergo a major turnabout? Is the North preparing to change its spots?

Prepare to be disappointed. Experience tells us that a healthy dose of skepticism is in order when we see hints of possible change in the DPRK. We have been down this road many times before and we are best served by taking such pronouncements from Pyongyang with a large grain of salt.

Nevertheless, several aspects of Kim Jong-un's remarks are noteworthy and give us some insight into the unfolding dynamics of Kim's rule, as well as a sense of how the North may deal with Seoul – and Washington – in the coming months.

To begin with, Kim Jong-un's high-profile speech to the nation was the latest manifestation of his artful "channeling" of his grandfather. To date, we have seen the youthful leader adopt many of the late Kim Il-sung's mannerisms, his style of dress, his gregarious way of dealing with subordinates, and even his haircut.

On January 1st, the young Kim took this talent to a new level as he revived Kim Il-sung's one-time practice of addressing the nation on New Year's Day to praise the country's accomplishments, inspire the masses, and chart the course forward. In following in his grandfather's footsteps, Kim Jong-un again distinguished himself from his late father, Kim Jong-il, who was famously averse to public appearances. A shy and uncomfortable speaker, Kim Jong-il opted instead to inspire the nation to achieve new heights by approving the annual New Year's joint editorial.

Kim Jong-un's choice of venue for the New Year's speech was important. He delivered his remarks at the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) Central Committee building, a site selected to reinforce another theme of his year-old leadership: the primacy of the Party over other institutions and the role of the KWP as the main vehicle for his rule. It was no accident

that the Party flag was displayed prominently next to Kim as he spoke.

Having sought to convey that he is a leader in his grandfather's mold, and having reminded the nation (particularly the military) that the Party under his leadership is in the driver's seat, Kim spent much of the speech holding forth on another central theme of his reign: economic growth. Looking through this section of the speech, one is hard pressed to find details about future economic plans or concrete new ideas aimed at boosting the DPRK's anemic economy. In fact, its hortatory calls for making new "advances," "building an economic giant," and "breaking through the cutting edge" resemble the timeworn, empty exhortations of past New Year's editorials. Thin gruel indeed.

Rumors have been circulating for some time that the regime intends to introduce "Chinese-style" reforms to rationalize the backward agricultural production process and to provide incentives to farmers. If this is the plan, Kim did a good job of obscuring it in a speech that was strikingly weak and uninspiring when it comes to something as important as producing food.

Perhaps we can draw some solace from the fact that Kim's speech was an unusually prominent call by the leader for the North to improve its economy. But if reform is the hope for North Korea, there was nothing in the speech to inspire it.

Kim's extension of an olive branch to the South was interesting, but hardly surprising. North-South relations have been in tatters due to the North's unwillingness to work with outgoing ROK President Lee. Perhaps driven by a desire not to waste another five years, Kim Jong-un used the speech to signal South Korean President-elect Park Geun-hye that he may be receptive to her stated intention to reach out to the North. And doing so may be in Pyongyang's interest. Re-engagement with the South would help bolster the North's economy, which has gone without significant economic, agricultural, and food aid from the ROK for most of the past five years.

Seen in this light, Kim's outreach to the South may be his way of putting Seoul on notice that re-engagement will have a price tag denominated in aid. And his reference to past North-South agreements concluded under progressive ROK governments is a reminder to the incoming ROK leadership that assistance was the sweetener that made those agreements possible.

If the new ROK president does intend to re-start aid to the North, she is likely to have her own asking price. The scars from the North's sinking of the ROK warship *Cheonan*, its artillery attack on the South's Yeonpyeong Island, and the killing of a ROK tourist at the Kungang Mountain resort by a

North Korean soldier have not yet healed. Many South Koreans will demand that Madame Park raise these unsettled issues with the North, and this is a message Pyongyang will not want to hear.

The United States goes unmentioned in Kim's speech. No surprise here. There will be plenty of time to mention the US (and the rest of the international community) when the North sees what action the US and the UN Security Council take in response to the DPRK's recent rocket launch.

For now, the young Kim may actually see himself as being in an advantageous position with respect to the US. He has achieved a central goal of the regime by successfully carrying out a long-range rocket launch. Thus far, nothing has been done to punish the DPRK. The success of the launch has taken the North a step further toward developing a credible ICBM threat to the US. Meanwhile, reports suggest the North may be mulling a nuclear test, a step that would both enhance the DPRK's "deterrent" and get Washington's attention.

And lest anyone think the DPRK's core priorities have changed, Kim reminds us that "only when it builds up its military might in every way" can North Korea become a "thriving country" and "defend the security and happiness" of its people. Indeed, while Kim's speech makes clear that the Party is in charge, he makes it no less clear that the regime's "military first" policy remains firm. For a speech that is widely interpreted as being about butter, guns are hardly in a distant second place.

Kim's self-confidence may also be due to the fact that China is already hinting at its unwillingness to support tough UNSC measures against the DPRK over the launch. And if past practice is any guide, we will soon hear the PRC praise Kim Jong-un's New Year's speech for its "moderation," as some in the U.S. and the ROK already have. The North Koreans are masters at neutralizing Beijing.

The young Kim could also believe that the US, eager not to be out of step with its ROK ally, will defer to Seoul's desire to re-engage with Pyongyang. And the US might even be eager to make overtures of its own, if it hasn't already. Pyongyang has developed a knack for "reading" Washington over the years – with some success. Today, North Korea's young leader may believe that a new foreign policy team in Washington is a ripe target of opportunity for a "kindler, gentler" approach by Pyongyang.

Finally, for a DPRK that wants the aid that often flows from dialogue with the US, the ROK, and others, re-engagement in talks is a low-risk option. Pyongyang has made eminently clear in recent years that denuclearization and the dismantlement of its missile program are no longer on the table. So what's to lose?

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