



## ***KIM JONG UN'S NEW LINE, PT. 2: MORE BARK THAN BITE?***

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*This is part two in a two-part series on the implications of North Korea's recent official change of stance toward South Korea, and is adapted from the author's [recent chapter](#) of Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-journal of Bilateral Relations in the Indo-Pacific.*

Barely a fortnight after the December Workers' Party of Korea Plenum ended, many of the same people were recalled to Pyongyang for the 10th Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) on Jan. 15. This year's meeting of North Korea's rubber-stamp Parliament was grandly titled: "On the Immediate Tasks for the Prosperity and Development of Our Republic and the Promotion of the Wellbeing of Our People."

As that suggests, like at the Plenum the focus was once again on economic policy. Yet, addressing the SPA, Kim began with a warning about the worsening security environment. This included a sideswipe at Seoul: "the suicidal acts of such servile states as the ROK unconditionally submitting to the US inflame the enmity of our Republic and...offer reasonable and full justification for strengthening the military capability and more rapidly improving the overwhelming nuclear war deterrent."

Kim now acknowledges this other state as a fact—but seems not to accept its right to exist. Military threats loomed large in Kim's SPA speech. He reiterated the DPRK's longstanding non-recognition of the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the de facto maritime border in the West/Yellow Sea:

"As the southern border of our country has been clearly drawn, the illegal 'northern limit line'

and any other boundary can never be tolerated, and if the ROK violates even 0.001 mm of our territorial land, air and waters, it will be considered a war provocation."

Kim then moves on to revising the Constitution. He is vexed that the ROK Constitution lays claim to the whole peninsula, whereas the DPRK's has no such provision. Therefore "it is necessary to take legal steps to legitimately and correctly define the territorial sphere where the sovereignty of the DPRK as an independent socialist nation is exercised."

If that seems fair, what follows is startling: "In my opinion, we can specify in our constitution the issue of completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming the ROK and annex it as a part of the territory of our Republic in case of (sic) a war breaks out" on the Korean Peninsula. Moreover "it is necessary to delete such expressions in the constitution as 'northern half' and 'independence, peaceful reunification and great national unity.'" Instead, the constitution must specify that "education should be intensified to instill into [our people] the firm idea that ROK is their primary foe and invariable principal enemy."

Kim cannot have it both ways. If the ROK is a wholly separate entity, such that "northern half" is a wrong term, then on what conceivable basis can the DPRK lay any kind of claim to it, let alone the right to occupy, subjugate, reclaim, and annex it? He talks as if this were a matter of territory alone—but what of 52 million South Koreans, who (whatever he says) remain compatriots by kinship, language, culture, and history?

It will be interesting, to say the least, to see how the amended constitution tries to square all these circles. The existing Assembly will probably be reconvened later this year, to amend the Constitution according to Kim's whims, before a new SPA is elected to approve whatever he comes up with next.

The new line also dictates practical tasks. Kim called for cross-border railways to be cut off, physically, completely, and "irretrievably." Furthermore, "we should also completely remove the eye-sore 'Monument to the Three Charters for National Reunification' [in] Pyongyang." The monument [seems](#) to have come down promptly, with the railway and other work following some months later.

Kim ends in a welter of militancy and contradictions. The DPRK's military buildup does not, he insists, presage any "preemptive attack for realizing unilateral 'reunification by force of arms.'"

Ah, so this is purely for self-defense? "I have already clearly mentioned the second mission of our nuclear force, in addition to its basic duty of deterring war." This second mission reserves the right to make a pre-emptive nuclear strike. In other words, Kim maintains the right to strike first if he feels threatened or provoked.

He concludes: "We do not want war, but we also have no intention of avoiding it. There is no reason to opt for war, and therefore, there is no intention of unilaterally going to war, but once a war becomes a reality facing us, we will never try to avoid it, and we will take perfect and prompt action we thoroughly prepared...The war will terribly destroy the entity called the Republic of Korea and put an end to its existence. And it will inflict an unimaginably crushing defeat upon the US."

The pro forma protestation of not wanting to fight seems belied by the glee with which the prospect is savored.

### **Less than meets the eye**

What to make of all this? First, this whole turn should be seen primarily as an event in DPRK domestic politics, rather than inter-Korean relations. It reflects Kim's frustration, shared by his predecessors, at the fact that South Korea exists: right there, on his doorstep and in his face, ever more successful and infinitely more prosperous. That is a profound challenge on many levels. Any North Korean government must find a way to account for and handle the South, in theory and practice alike.

Second, I suspect this is Kim's own idea. His visceral dislike for the ROK underlay an earlier episode: the razing of Southern-built facilities at the former Mount Kumgang tourist resort. Kim's remarks at the time betrayed a seething anger at the very idea of South Korean property on Northern territory. He seemed to be against cooperation as such, not just annoyed at how this project had turned out.

Third, another reason to attribute this idea to Kim is the sheer incoherence noted above. What does he mean by "ROK": Regime? Territory? People? He slips between

all three, especially the first two. And if ROK is a separate state, on what basis is the DPRK entitled to subjugate it?

Put another way, this bears the hallmark of Kim Ki Nam's retirement. If the master molder of DPRK ideology and propaganda over many decades had still been on the case—he died aged 94 on May 7, having retired some years earlier—such a crass idea would surely never have been approved. For it solves no problems but creates a number of new ones.

Whatever Kim says, ordinary North Koreans know that South Koreans are in fact their kin, both in general and in particular. Highly publicized family reunions, whatever their inadequacies, are not a distant memory. People will be puzzled, to say the least, at now being told otherwise. Moreover, this runs directly counter to the line decreed by previous Kims. Jong Un's legitimacy rests largely on fidelity to his father and grandfather, so for him to openly defy this legacy must be risky.

### **Bark or bite?**

We know what Kim now says, but what will he do? At risk of sounding complacent, my bet is: Nothing much. First, Kim's keenness to snuggle up to both Russia and China by no means creates a strong, united troika. Behind the formal bonhomie, both Xi and Putin are wary that this Kim might emulate his grandfather and drag them into costly and distracting conflict. China, in particular, which holds the purse-strings, will not tolerate peninsular adventurism.

A second point: If Kim seriously intended to cause trouble at the NLL, for instance, would he really give advance warning? Hamas did not go around shouting like this before Oct. 7, nor warn that they planned to cut Israel's border fence.

A third reason is Kim Jong Un's record. Readers may recall the politically tempestuous summer of 2020. Pyongyang frothed with talk of marching south, though this was not billed as a change of line. It all ended explosively, but no one was hurt when the North blew up the (by then unoccupied) former inter-Korean liaison office near Kaesong.

None of this suggests a peninsula on the brink of war. Both sides are pushing the envelope, and the North's new

doctrine is alarming if taken at face value—but that is the nub. Kim Jong Un faces a mountain of problems at home. Threatening to subjugate the South solves none of them but may—or may not—briefly distract his people from their hardships. While vigilance remains essential, Kim’s lurid new stance looks very like a new variation on a very old theme of fire-breathing performativity.

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