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Kim Jong Un's 2019 New Year's Address: Evaluation and Prospects



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Kim Jong Un's 2019 New Year's Address was, generally speaking, a replay of the performances he has shown since his first New Year's Address in 2013. That being said, instead of wearing *inminbok*, or 'people's clothes', and presenting his address from a standing podium like before, this year he was seated on a sofa chair dressed in a black suit with a necktie. That he wore a black suit with a necktie instead of *inminbok*—a symbol of socialism—suggests that he was trying to emphasize his image of being the leader of a 'normal country'. Moreover, that he made his address while seated on a sofa was likely aimed at showing that he is no different from leaders in the US and other countries.

There were few noteworthy areas of the address that concerned North Korea's domestic economy, politics or society. The emphasis on "self-reliance" in the address likely symbolizes that North Korea understands that there is no easy way to resolve the strengthening of the international community's sanctions on North Korea, which have stemmed from the country's nuclear and missile development. In past public speeches, including past New Year's addresses, Kim occasionally presented specific numbers while talking about the country's economic targets; this year, however, it was notable that the address was largely devoid of such figures.

The areas in the address that concerned South Korea were already predictable to some extent given the 'Year-end Personal Letter' that Kim sent to President Moon Jae-in late last year. Kim's letter stated that he was open to meeting with Moon frequently to develop discussions aimed at peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and to jointly resolve the denuclearization issue. The New Year's Address also assessed 2018 inter-Korean relations in a very positive manner and expressed a strong resolve to further expand and develop the inter-Korean relationship in 2019. Kim's statement that he was open to resuming the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mount Kumgang tourism "without any precondition or in return for nothing" further put on display his resolve to use inter-Korean relations to overcome the difficulties the country faces through sanctions and external pressure.

Kim's repeated emphasis on unification in the address requires special attention. In particular, Kim's statement that North and South Korea should "actively try to find a peaceful reunification plan based on nationwide agreement and direct sincere efforts to this end" hints at the possibility that North Korea may mount a campaign toward South Korea at both the governmental and nongovernmental levels. Given that the government-led expansion and development of inter-Korean relations is not easy due to continued sanctions on North Korea by the international community, North Korea may actively try to bypass this issue by engaging with South Korea through nongovernmental activities. North Korea thus may again raise the possibility of holding a 'Joint Conference of Representatives of Political Parties and Social Organizations of North and South Korea' or a 'nationwide conference', proposals that the country has made before.

North Korea likely proposed multilateral negotiations aimed at establishing a peace system because the country's leaders believe that the South Korean government played a significant role in bringing about the improvement in US-DPRK relations and on the denuclearization issue even as political winds on the Korean Peninsula changed dramatically over the course of 2018.

Linking denuclearization with the establishment of new US-DPRK relations and the establishment of a peace system on the peninsula, North Korea likely felt considerable difficulty in conducting bilateral negotiations with the US and now appears to desire a widening of the participants to include South Korea and China, both of which have been closely connected with these negotiations.

Kim's direct and repeated emphasis during the address on his strong resolve to implement the US-DPRK Joint Statement of June 12 (2018) and the holding of a second US-DPRK summit is also significant. It is important to note that he mentioned that North Korea would not "make and test nuclear weapons any longer." This statement appears to be a response to recent observations by a US-based research institute that North Korea continues to develop nuclear weapons and missiles following the standstill in working-level negotiations between the US and the DPRK after US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's fourth visit to North Korea in October 2018. That Kim did not mention missiles at all during the address suggests that the country is telling the world not to doubt North Korea's genuine intention to denuclearize.

North Korea's existing stance on the denuclearization process was reflected in Kim's address and he appeared to display some degree of flexibility. The address confirmed the country's existing stance that it would completely abandon and destroy its nuclear and missile development programs when the confrontational relationship between the US and DPRK ends and mutual trust is established. Kim used the progress made in 2018 between the two Koreas as a model when he mentioned that the two sides should "remov[e] each other's apprehensions" while meeting and holding talks and this hints at the possibility that North Korea may take a flexible position in negotiations with the US, including during a second US-DPRK summit. Kim's mention of a "new way" is aimed at shoring up North Korea's own negotiation power by pressuring the US when negotiations experience difficulties and may suggest that North Korea will go forward with an alternative plan if US-DPRK negotiations fail.

To summarize Kim's address and the current situation, it appears that North Korea has a strong resolve to continue negotiations with the US about denuclearization and this suggests that US-DPRK negotiations may restart soon. North Korea also appears to have a proactive attitude toward the improvement and development of inter-Korean relations. North Korea will try to establish the final conditions for peace on the Korean Peninsula, guarantees over regime security, and the development of inter-Korean relations by implementing the measures aimed at reducing military tensions agreed upon in 2018 by the two Koreas. There is also the possibility that North Korea will mount a peace campaign toward South Korea aimed at creating the necessary political environment as the atmosphere of peace further settles on the Korean Peninsula. Even if international sanctions are not relaxed or dismantled, North Korea may expand exchanges and cooperation like those involving the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mount Kumgang tourism aimed at developing the inter-Korean relationship. In this way, the country will try to offset the impact of continued sanctions while further securing its own regime security through improvement in the inter-Korean relationship. In 2019, North Korea will link denuclearization, the relaxation and dismantling of sanctions and improvements in the inter-Korean relationship together as part of its "virtuous cycle strategy" aimed at South Korea and the world.

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