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## North Korea's "New Path": Making a "Frontal Breakthrough"



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This year, North Korea simply released the results of the 5th plenary session of the 7th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) instead of broadcasting a New Year's address by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The plenary session, which began on December 28, lasted until December 31, the last day of 2019 and the deadline set by North Korea for US-DPRK negotiations to end. This year's New Year's address became, in effect, the results of the plenary session, which were similar in detail and composition to the country's past New Year's addresses.

Kim Jong Un was quoted in the plenary session document as saying he had held the plenary session to analytically review the obstacles North Korea faces and identify "decisive ways" to further speed up the country's socialist construction. In the document, Kim presented a macro-level picture of the country's construction of a "socialist and strong country" while also going into detail about the goals that need to be achieved in 2020. This attention to detail seems due to the fact that apart from Central Committee members and candidates, working-level members of state organizations, the heads of provincial people's committees, the directors of provincial agricultural management committees, the managers of municipal and county committees, among other members of the important organizations, were in attendance at the plenary session. Instead of simply broadcasting his New Year Address on TV as he did last year, the plenary session allowed Kim to directly hand down the tasks that need to be achieved in 2020 and, consequently, demonstrate that 2020 is a very important year for North Korea.

The key phrase that came out of the plenary session was "turn out in the offensive for [a] frontal breakthrough to foil the enemies' sanctions and blockade by dint of self-reliance." This can be interpreted not as a "new path" for North Korea; rather, it suggests that North Korea will now find its "own path" forward through its "own methods" and without relying on paths that depend on the US. North Korean leaders have essentially concluded that the breakdown of US-DPRK negotiations in Hanoi was due to the false expectations and hopes they had toward US-DPRK negotiations since 2018. The actions shown by North Korea over the past eight months both economically and militarily differs little from those actions taken by the country in 2018, despite the fact that North Korea had set a deadline for the termination of US-DPRK talks for the end of the year.

Kim Jong Un appears to have decided to place science and technology at the forefront to resolve the problems North Korea faces after he made changes to his policies back in April. This shift in policy has led him to loudly promote his military-related achievements to calm the security fears of his people and ensure the military retains its dominance in national affairs. This strategy also sends a hardline message to the world that North Korea will not "surrender" to foreign threats. Kim has centered his rhetoric around the US to explain why North Korea must make a "frontal breakthrough" toward the problems it faces. Kim has, in effect, placed the blame on the US for North Korea's need to conduct this "frontal breakthrough." In the background, of course, he is hinting that North Koreans will have a difficult 2020. The achievements of the country's National Economic Development Strategy (2016-2020) also remain unclear.

During the plenary session, Kim criticized the US for “playing for time” as part of that country’s “two-faced efforts” to pressure North Korea. Kim called the current situation a “confrontation” between North Korea’s strategy of self-reliance and international sanctions. North Korea argues that the threat from the US will continue even if the nuclear issue is resolved; in effect, the country’s leaders are clearly stating that they will not exchange North Korea’s national security, dignity and future safety for anything. This suggests that future denuclearization negotiations will face difficulty. Kim also remarked that North Koreans will have to continue to live amid long-term confrontation with the US and international sanctions. This clearly suggests that Kim knows that US-DPRK negotiations have a hard road ahead and that his country must prepare for a “long confrontation” by mobilizing all its resources, including all the human and material resources at his disposal.

Kim further stated during the plenary session that North Korea must fortify its internal strength for this “frontal breakthrough,” and emphasized that the frontlines of the coming “long confrontation” frontlines are centered within the country’s economic sector. He specifically pointed out the need to reorganize the fundamentals of North Korea’s economy, including a reorganization of the economic system, and unifying and securing the leadership of the Cabinet. This suggests that noteworthy changes in the economy may be afoot. Kim also mentioned during his speech at the plenary session about the “national crisis management system”; this was remarkable because it showed him directly ordering specific tasks to working-level officials.

Kim said that North Korea will take aggressive measures to secure both sovereignty and security in its political, diplomatic and military spheres to support this “frontal breakthrough.” However, these measures are clearly not the goals of the “new path”; rather, they are tools to achieve it. Kim suggested that there were “strategies” to strengthen the country’s diplomatic frontline to face the current international environment, but there were no specifics mentioned about this in the results of the plenary session. However, we can predict that North Korea will strengthen its diplomacy with China and Russia through international solidarity or multi-party talks. That Kim did not mention anything about inter-Korean relations or make remarks about future plans or tasks regarding North Korea’s international relations -- apart from his “review” of the state of US-DPRK relations -- suggests that North Korea will largely focus on resolving internal issues in 2020.

Kim also stated during the plenary session that the goal of “building national defenses” is to strengthen the country’s military strength so that no country can use force against it. He also said that North Korea will continue to develop “strategic weapons.” Kim also pointed out that the world would witness a “new strategic weapon” and that North Korea would take action to resolve the difficulties endured by the North Korean people and efforts to suppress the country’s development. The “strategic weapon” mentioned here likely refers to the weapon whose engine was tested at the Tongchang-ri Engine Testing Center in December. It may be a solid propellant engine ICBM, a multi-warhead ICBM or even a new kind of submarine with strategic missiles. Kim did not make his mention about the new strategic weapon explicit, but his remarks suggest that North Korea could pull back from its moratorium on ICBM testing, which was part of the country’s declaration to halt nuclear and ICBM weapons testing at the third plenary session on April 20, 2018.

Kim also noted during the plenary session “that the scope and depth of bolstering our deterrent will be properly coordinated depending on the U.S. future attitude [sic] to the DPRK.” This could be interpreted as part of North Korea’s continuing efforts to keep the door open for negotiations with the US. However, such optimism may be misplaced. Kim was also reported as stating at the plenary session that if “the U.S. persists in its hostile policy towards the DPRK, there will never be denuclearization on the Korean peninsula and the DPRK will steadily develop necessary and prerequisite strategic weapons for the security of the state until the U.S. rolls back its hostile policy towards the DPRK and lasting and durable peace-keeping mechanism is built.” A proper interpretation of these remarks is that North Korea may increase the speed of its nuclear weapons development if the US continues or strengthens its hostile policies or sanctions against the country. This suggests that future US-DPRK negotiations won’t be easy given that North

Korea's strategy rests on being a nuclear-armed country.

North Korea's move toward a "frontal breakthrough" does not necessarily mean the complete end of its relations with the US. The most attractive way for North Korea to carve itself out of its current predicaments is through negotiations with the US. If North Korea does in fact make progress in the economic development tasks presented at the plenary session, conducts massive celebrations commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Worker's Party of Korea, and holds its 8th Party Congress in the spring of 2021, there is the possibility that a second round of US-DPRK negotiations could occur after the US presidential election and the new American administration finds its footing. The problem, however, is that the "price" North Korea must pay to get a second round of US-DPRK talks will be much higher if Yongbyon and Tongchang-ri continue to exist up until that time.

What's important to note here is that inter-Korean relations and international relations surrounding the Korean Peninsula will probably worsen in 2020, regardless of the direction of US-DPRK relations. We must give up the baseless hope that US-DPRK relations will develop hand-in-hand with those of the two Koreas. Kim Jong Un mentioned his country's participation in the PyeongChang Olympics and inter-Korean dialogue in his 2018 New Year's Address. He also made remarks about Mt. Kumgang tourism and the unconditional restart of the Kaesong Industrial Complex in his 2019 New Year's Address. How are we to interpret his complete disregard for inter-Korean relations during the plenary session? The plenary session's report states that North Korea will continue to "severely hit back" at the US and its "supporting hostile forces." The phrase "supporting hostile forces" appears to include South Korea. We now face questions about what we can realistically do to help restart US-DPRK talks in 2020. South Korea needs to stop waiting for US-DPRK talks to restart; rather, we need to have the courage and put in the efforts to improve inter-Korean relations and bring peace to the Korean Peninsula. We need to create a new space for inter-Korean relations to develop instead of allowing them to be reliant on the ups and downs of US-DPRK relations.

If we don't make our own "new path," South Korea will face a very difficult year in 2020 ? more so than in past years. South Korea needs to improve inter-Korean relations by diversifying its diplomatic efforts. We need to avoid being reliant on only the US and work closely with China, Japan, Russia and other neighboring countries to find and go down our own "new path."

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