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## Is a New Korean War in the Offing?



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In recent days, U.S. media have been proclaiming that North Korea plans to initiate military action against its neighbor to the south. An article by Robert L. Carlin and Siegfried S. Hecker, neither previously prone to making wild assertions, created quite a splash and set off a chain reaction of media fear-mongering. In Carlin's and Hecker's assessment, "[W]e believe that, like his grandfather in 1950, Kim Jong Un has made a strategic decision to go to war." They add that if North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is convinced that engagement with the United States is not possible, then "his recent words and actions point toward the prospects of a military solution using [his nuclear] arsenal." [1]

U.S. officials have stated that while they do not see “an imminent risk of a full-scale war on the Korean Peninsula,” Kim Jong Un “could take some form of lethal military action against South Korea in the coming months after having shifted to a policy of open hostility.” [2] How do these sensationalist claims stack up against the evidence?

It is no secret that lately, the stance of the United States and South Korea has hardened against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK – the formal name for North Korea). Since the centerpiece for suggesting that war may be on the horizon is Kim’s speech at the 14<sup>th</sup> Supreme People’s Assembly, its content is worth examining in some detail. [3] What strikes one when reading the text is that mainstream media have taken quotes out of context and ignored much of the content of Kim’s speech, creating an impression of unprovoked belligerence.

Also generally absent from media reporting is the speech’s relationship to the backdrop of events since the far-right Yoon Suk Yeol became president of South Korea in May 2022. Yoon came into office determined to smash every vestige of the improved inter-Korean environment established during his predecessor’s term. Instead, Yoon prioritized making South Korea a subordinate partner in the Biden administration’s hyper-militarized Indo-Pacific Strategy.

To fully understand Kim Jong Un’s speech, one must also consider the nature of the Biden administration’s rapid military escalation in the Asia-Pacific. The United States conducts a virtually nonstop series of military exercises at North Korea’s doorstep, practicing the bombing and invasion of that nation. One South Korean analyst has counted 42 joint U.S.-South Korean military exercises conducted in 2023 alone, along with ten more involving Japan. [4] Those totals do not include exercises that the U.S. and South Korea engaged in outside of Northeast Asia, such as Exercise Talisman Sabre in Australia and Exercise Cobra Gold in Thailand. Moreover, U.S. actions on the Korean Peninsula must also be situated within the broader geopolitical framework of its hostility towards China.

Last year, in an act of overt intimidation, the United States conducted seven exercises with nuclear-capable bombers over the Korean Peninsula. [5] Additional flights involved the B-1 bomber, which the U.S. Air Force says “can rapidly deliver massive quantities of precision and non-precision weapons.” [6] Through its actions, the United States sends far more provocative messages than anything that could be honestly construed in Kim’s speech. But then, we are led to see nothing amiss in such aggressive behavior from the United States. Nevertheless, the threat is real and unmistakable from the targeted nation’s perspective.

It also has not gone unnoticed in Pyongyang that U.S. and South Korean military forces regularly conduct training exercises to practice assassinating Kim Jong Un and other North Korean officials. [7] Just this month, U.S. Green Berets and soldiers from South Korea's Special Warfare Command completed training focused on the targeted killing of North Korean individuals. [8] The Biden administration avers that it harbors no hostile intent toward the DPRK, but its actions say otherwise, loud and clear.

North Korea, with a GDP that the United Nations ranks just behind that of Congo and Laos, is considered such a danger that the U.S. must confront it with substantial military might. An inconvenient question that is never asked is why the DPRK is singled out for punishment and threats when the other nuclear non-members of the Non-Proliferation Treaty – each armed with ballistic missiles — are not. What distinguishes North Korea from India, Pakistan, and Israel? How is it that North Korea is regarded as a threat to peace but not Israel, notwithstanding mounting evidence to the contrary? The essential distinction is that North Korea is the only one of the four that is not a U.S. ally; moreover, one which the U.S. wishes to retain the ability to bomb, whether or not it ever exercises the option to do so.

It is a tribute to the persuasiveness of propaganda that the United States, with its record of multiple wars, bombings, and drone assassinations in recent decades, can convince so many that the DPRK, which has done none of these things during the same period, is a danger to international peace and stability. Yet, such towering hypocrisy goes largely unnoticed. It would appear that there is no principle involved in targeting only North Korea and not the other nuclear-armed non-members of the NPT — unless outrage over a small nation following an independent path being able to defend itself can be regarded as a principle.

Predictably, Washington think tank analysts and media commentators are throwing more heat than light on the subject of Kim's pronouncements, and they are always ready with a cliché at hand. Some, like Bruce W. Bennett of RAND Corporation, let their imagination run wild, conjuring bizarre absurdities. Bennett suggests that armed with more nuclear weapons in the years ahead, North Korea “could threaten one or more U.S. cities with nuclear attack if the United States does not repeal its sanctions against North Korea.” Or perhaps, he suggests, the DPRK could threaten the U.S. with a limited nuclear attack “unless it abandons its alliance with [South Korea]” or “disengage from Ukraine.” As for South Korea, Bennett warns that Kim might insist that it “pay him \$100 billion per year

and permanently discontinue producing K-pop...” [9] This is what passes as expert analysis in Washington.

The military section of Kim’s speech was at root defensive, pointing out that North Korea’s “security environment has been steadily deteriorated” and that if it wants to take “the road of independent development,” it must be fully prepared to defend itself. Kim quotes specific threats made by U.S. and South Korean leaders to emphasize his awareness that his nation is in the crosshairs.

At one point in his speech, Kim suggested that the constitution could specify “the issue of completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming the ROK [Republic of Korea, the formal name for South Korea] and annex it...in case war breaks out...” He added, “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.” Such a war, he warned, “will terribly destroy the entity called the Republic of Korea and put an end to its existence” and “inflict an unimaginably crushing calamity and defeat upon the U.S.” Kim continues, “If the enemies ignite a war, our Republic will resolutely punish the enemies by mobilizing all its military forces including nuclear weapons.” Harsh language, indeed, intended to remind the war hawks in Washington and Seoul not to imagine that their nations are invulnerable if they attack the DPRK. Note also the conditional phrasing, which tends to get downplayed in Western media.

Even less attention is paid to more direct clarifying language, such as Kim’s statement that the DPRK’s military is for “legitimate self-defense” and “not a means of preemptive attack for realizing unilateral reunification by force of arms.” And: “Explicitly speaking, we will never unilaterally unleash a war if the enemies do not provoke us.”

It was entirely predictable that Western media would put the worst spin on Kim’s blunt language that mirrored earlier South Korean pronouncements. The month before Kim’s speech, South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won-sik warned, “North Korea has only two choices – peace or destruction. If North Korea makes reckless actions that harm peace, only a hell of destruction awaits them.” [10] A few days later, Yoon ordered his military to launch an “immediate and overwhelming response” to any provocation by the DPRK. [11] Yoon and South Korean military officials use the term ‘provocation’ so loosely as to encompass almost any action the DPRK takes that they do not like, including what is normal behavior for other nations – or for South Korea itself, for that matter. South Korean and North Korean rhetoric identifying each other as enemies and destruction in the event of war differ in that the former preceded the latter. By ignoring the fact that North

Korea is reacting to prior South Korean statements, mainstream media can portray Kim's language as unprovoked.

Last December, Yoon heightened the risk of conflict when he visited an infantry division near the border and gave them an order: "In case of provocations, I ask you to immediately retaliate in response and report it later." [12] Vague in defining neither "provocation" nor the appropriate response level and delegating to lower-level commanders to decide those questions, this formula potentially can transform a minor clash of arms into a conflict of wider impact.

Kim's statements are presented in Western media as tantamount to a plan to start a war. Earlier statements of a similar nature by the Yoon administration that created an acrimonious atmosphere are rendered invisible or uncontroversial. It is fair to say that given North Korea's longstanding practice of responding in kind, Kim may have adopted more restrained phrasing without South Korean officials setting the tone.

Western media have raised concerns over Kim's labeling of South Korea as a "principal enemy." We are not reminded that nearly one year before, South Korea had re-designated the DPRK as "our enemy" in its Defense White Paper. [13] Under Yoon's predecessor, Moon Jae-in, the defense paper dropped the reference to North Korea as an enemy. [14] The general pattern has been for liberal presidents to shun that tag in the interests of inter-Korean relations and for conservative presidents to embrace it as one element in their project to undo progress. Yoon himself frequently refers to North Korea as the enemy, and his administration's National Security Strategy document describes the Kill Chain system, which is designed to launch preemptive strikes on North Korea. [15] In omitting such details, cause and effect are inverted, reinforcing the media-constructed Orientalist image of an irrational leader at the helm of the DPRK, prone to unpredictable statements and rash acts.

Patience has run thin in Pyongyang, as Biden's trilateral alliance with South Korea and Japan, "buoyed with war fever," as Kim put it, sharply escalates military tensions in the region. In a sharp reversal, North Korea has abandoned its longstanding policy of seeking improved inter-Korean relations and working toward peaceful reunification. Any headway achieved in the past has quickly been undone in South Korea whenever the conservative party came to power. Still, Yoon has taken matters further than the norm, not only willfully dynamiting inter-Korean relations but also deliberately raising the risk of military conflict. Inter-Korean relations have reached such a nadir under Yoon that the DPRK sees

no hope of progress in the current circumstances. The North Koreans are not wrong in that perception.

Sadly, in a clear signal of its exasperation with Yoon, North Korea demolished the Arch of Reunification in Pyongyang, and all governmental bodies responsible for reunification planning and projects were shut down. The latter steps are not inherently irreversible, however. But as long as Yoon remains in power, there is no conceivable possibility of progress on reunification. Yoon has slammed the door shut on inter-Korean relations.

One would never know it from Western reports, but more than two-thirds of Kim's speech focused on economic development. "The supreme task," Kim announced, "is to stabilize and improve the people's living as early as possible." Peace is an essential prerequisite for the realization of that goal. North Koreans are well aware of American and South Korean military capabilities, and a war would not only wipe out new economic projects but most of the existing infrastructure as well.

Immense damage has been done to the DPRK's economy by sanctions designed to target the entire population and inflict as much suffering as possible. [16] The period when North Korea closed its border with China in response to the COVID-19 pandemic added to economic challenges. Reversing direction is imperative. In his speech, Kim called for "a radical turn in the economic construction and improvement of the people's living standard" and said that progress is being made "despite unprecedented trials." Kim enumerated industrial, power, housing, and other ongoing projects.

Kim admitted there have been internal challenges in economic development. "It is a reality that the Party and the government yet fail to meet even the simple demand of the people in life..." In particular, regional and urban-rural economic imbalances have plagued the North Korean economy for decades. "At present," Kim continued, "there is a great disparity of living standards between the capital city and provinces and between towns and the countryside." Kim acknowledged that these issues have not been adequately addressed in the past, but it "is an immediate task" to do so now.

Kim took the occasion to officially unveil the launch of the Regional Development 20×10 Policy. This ambitious plan calls for substantially raising material and cultural standards in twenty counties over the next ten years, including constructing regional industrial factories and establishing advanced educational institutions. In particular, emphasis is to be given to scientific and technological development. The aim is to even out regional imbalances and to accelerate overall development.



None of this can be achieved if the U.S. and South Korea are showering the DPRK with high explosives, and the Regional 20×10 Policy makes nonsense of Western scaremongering that Kim has decided to go to war. As usual, though, when it comes to reporting on North Korea, assertion substitutes for evidence, and we can expect Washington think tanks, U.S. media, military contractors, and the Biden administration to capitalize on the manufactured image of a war-mad Kim Jong Un to accelerate the military buildup in the Asia-Pacific, aimed against the DPRK and the People’s Republic of China. For his part, Yoon can be expected to amplify military tensions on the Korean Peninsula and sharpen his war on South Korean progressives. What is not in the cards is militarism abating in the foreseeable future.

**Notes.**

[1] Robert L. Carlin and Siegfried S. Hecker, “Is Kim Jong Un Preparing for War,” 38 North, January 11, 2024.

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[3] “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at 10<sup>th</sup> Session of the 14<sup>th</sup> SPA,” KCNA, January 16, 2024.

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[6] <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/104500/b-1b-lancer/>

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[12] Kim Han-joo, “Yoon Orders Military to Retaliate First, Report Later in Case of Enemy Attacks,” Yonhap, December 28, 2023.

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[16] <https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/09/19/trumps-war-on-the-north-korean-people/>  
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