North Korea, Refraining From ‘Impulsive Behaviors’ Against the U.S. While Venting Threats Against South Korea

North Korean threats against Seoul and restraint toward Washington, 2020

At the Plenary Session of the Korea Workers’ Party held last December, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un stated that the United States is continuing to waste time, and that North Korea will soon show “real, shocking action.” He was threatening retaliation against United States economic sanctions by reinforcing North Korea’s ‘nuclear capabilities presumably in the form of another nuclear test.’ However, as of July 2020, that ‘Christmas present’ has not been delivered. Instead, in June 2020, Pyongyang unexpectedly delivered 20 consecutive days of threats against South Korea. Coming at the time of the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, it seemed that North Korea was threatening a ‘June surprise’ instead.

On June 4th, Kim Yo-Jong, First Vice Director of the Workers’ Party, criticized the South Korean Government for failing to prevent North Korean defectors continued sending of anti-Communist leaflets into its territory. Although these actions of North Korean defectors are not a recent occurrence, Kim used this as a pretext for blaming South Korea.

In addition, North Korea blamed Seoul for its ‘hostile relations,’ cut off all contact channels on 9 June, destroyed the North-South Joint Liaison Office in Kaesong on 16 June, and threatened to ‘refortify the DMZ area with military power and support the North Korean citizens’ fight with propaganda leaflets against the South’ through the Joint Chief of Staff of the Korean People’s Army (6.16). However, Kim Jong-un suspended the ‘military operations’ on June 23rd.

The military operations that North Korea had threatened and then deferred included restoration and rearmament of the guard post that had been previously withdrawn and destroyed following the North-South Military Agreement of 19 September 2018, reinstallation of megaphone broadcasting systems in 30 locations along the De-Militarized Zone, and preparation for military support to retaliate against 12 million anti-Pyongyang leaflets coming from the South. It is highly likely that Pyongyang’s suspension of its threat reflected the division of labour between Kim Yo-jong as the ‘bad cop’ and Kim Jong-un as the ‘good cop’. If North Korea had gone ahead with its threats, the North-South Military Agreement would have been abrogated, enabling the South to
undertake use of reconnaissance drones to increase surveillance activity against the North. And if North Korea also reinstalled their own loud speaker and sent balloons of leaflets, they would no longer have justification for demanding South Korea to stop a psychological warfare that would result in more burden for the North.

On the other hand, North Korea’s attitudes towards the United States became relatively moderate this year. They refrained from criticism against the U.S., and refrained from undertaking provocative actions against Washington. The only dissatisfaction North Korea showed was in stalling on a resumption negotiation with the U.S in July on three separate occasions.

Kim Yo-jong insisted that ‘America is only wasting time by adhering to hostile policies against North Korea, so a U.S.-North Korea summit is no longer useful.’ However, as “Kim Jong-un wanted to send a message across that he ‘wishes for President Trump’s positive business outcomes,’” they are still anticipating for President Trump’s reelection. These attitudes towards the U.S. seem to be very moderate compared to that of last December.

The circumstances of the previous year were as follows. After the Hanoi summit fell apart, Kim Jong-un insisted on negotiations with the United States with a ‘new system of measuring denuclearization by the year-end’ symbolizing a ‘prior lifting of sanctions’ in April of 2019. However, as President Trump showed no decision even though the end of the year was rapidly approaching, North Korea started to make intimidating remarks towards the U.S. through the party, government, and military executives in December 2019. They stated that “the Christmas present depends on America’s attitudes” (Vice Minister Ri Tae Sung, Ministry of Foreign Affairs December 3), that “there may be terrible consequences” (Chief of Staff Park Jung Chun, December 4), and urging the US to “consider the offer in order to avoid disastrous results” (Vice Chairman Ri Su Yong, December 19). In addition to these threats, Kim Jong-un declared his intention in late December to ‘develop new strategic weapons’ and ‘put things into real, shocking action’ against the United States.

■ Background of Kim Jong Un's Threats Against South Korea:

The characteristics of North Korea’s ‘June Threats Against the South’ include venting their anger towards South Korea from planning more pressure on America, attempting to intimidate South Korea with nuclear threats, and trying to alter North Korean citizens’ dissatisfaction with financial difficulties towards hostility against South Korea.

First, it is notable that North Korea was venting its anger towards South Korea instead of the United States. As mentioned previously, North Korea limited their threats and provocation against the U.S. starting this year, but willingly increased blunt remarks, short-distance missile tests, and even actual threatening behavior against South Korea last year. North Korea claimed that its threat against South Korea was in response to Seoul's failure to prevent the scattering of anti-Pyongyang leaflets across the DMZ that “provoked the supremacy dignity and nuclear issues.” Yet, it is notable that the messages focused on problems of the North-South Economic Cooperation Division that
“continues to bluff but takes no step towards real action,” while showing dissatisfaction on sanctions by arguing to “quit talking nonsense about denuclearization.” Even in response to South Korea’s efforts in mediating between the U.S. and North Korea, Pyongyang demanded that the South “stop interfering foolishly without any change in America’s position.”

Second, North Korea has sought to intimidate the South. Although Kim Yo-Jong’s threats, rupture of communication channels, destruction of the inter-Korean Liaison Office, and threats of military actions continued with the scattering of anti-Pyongyang leaflets being used as an excuse, there has been much evidence that shows proof of prior panning of these actions. The fact that the threatening behaviors against South Korea started off with a top-down process from the Kim family, the fact that they opened up to the public about ‘sending an envoy for a plea’ even after the South’s corrective action, and especially the fact that they fragmented the threat process in order to highlight Pyongyang’s anger towards Seoul illustrates the deliberate nature of North Korea’s aggressiveness. Starting from the General Staff Department’s statement to “take things into military action once the Central Military Commission makes a decision,” (6.16) to the revelation that “the Central Military Commission has made a decision at the preliminary conference to defer” (6.23), North Korea intentionally created conditions that would allow It to escalate tensions in inter-Korean relations.

Third is the use of advocating hostility amongst North Korean citizens towards the South. Although the problem of defectors and leaflets has been a sensitive topic in the past, North Korea decided to mobilize its general public into large-scale protests in condemnation of South Korea.. With the combination of prolonged sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic, the two unfavorable factors led to North Korea’s internal economic difficulties resulting in citizens’ dissatisfaction regarding the entire system. The authorities instilled hostility against the defectors amongst the citizens and attempted to block the expansion of breaking away from its system.

1) In conclusion, the fact that North Korea deliberately exercised restraint towards the US whilst simultaneously planning detailed, deliberate threats against Seoul, illustrates that North Korea's provocations are not merely a sign of protest over anti-Pyongyang leaflets from the South. It is a carefully calculated attack on the South based on the division of labour between Kim Jong-un and Kim Yo-jong that is based on intimidation of the South, protests against the U.S., and internal solidarity within Pyongyang. Kim Yo-Jong’s harsh statement must have been deliberately designed to enhance her political status, but more importantly it also expresses Kim Jong-un's frustration as it reflects his intentions and power through the need of those statements being approved by him.

The initial plans of Kim Jong-un regarding strategies against the U.S. included ‘real, shocking actions’ through the increase in nuclear power in order to gain the Trump administration’s attention. However, as the joint South Korea-U.S. military exercises that were originally planned for this spring got cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea lost its opportunity to display its threat behaviors.
Furthermore, although President Trump claims to have a ‘good personal relationship’ with Kim Jong-un, he is unable to engage in serious diplomacy with Kim Jong Un before the forthcoming 2020 US Presidential Elections. Thus, it is highly likely that Kim Jong-un’s plans for ‘nuclear disarmament negotiations’ will face a setback in the event that Trump is reelected. Because of such concerns, Kim Jong-un has had to exercise extreme caution toward the U.S.

Since the beginning of this year, North Korea has been internally emphasizing “rehabilitation” and “economical independence.” However, the COVID-19 pandemic, on top of prolonged sanctions, have made living conditions even harder for the people of North Korea, resulting in increased social dissatisfaction. South Korea expressed its willingness to help the North, but the South Korean government’s capacity to mediate became undermined as it was unable to go beyond saying that there will be “no lifting of sanctions before denuclearization”.

The effectiveness of Kim Jong-un’s strategies against the U.S. have been undermined due to increasing difficulties facing Trump’s reelection bid that have resulted from the combined impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recession and racial tensions in the US.

The initial strategies against the U.S. that Kim Jong-un initially had in mind fell apart as the prospects for Trump’s reelection have become increasingly unclear. The internal financial difficulties resulting from international sanctions, along with the likelihood that the COVID-19 has entered North Korea, have probably resulted in Kim’s frustration. And because the leaflets were scattered in North Korea at a time like this, they used this as an excuse to vent their anger out on South Korea.

<Table> Process and Characteristics of North Korea’s ‘June Revenge and Threats’

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※ Characteristics: ①Led by Kim Yo-jong ②Self-generating threats against the South ③Fragmentation of the threat process ④Opening up to the North Korean citizens about
the threats against the South ▪ Application of threats in sending messages across to the United States

■ Future Large-Scale Armed Protests and Prediction of Main Force Behind Management of Messages Towards the U.S.

It can be predicted that North Korea will refrain from further threats against the South, at least until the end of the year. Their stance has been clearly delivered to the South Korean government, and the Moon Jae-in government showed its willingness to work towards improving the North-South relationship. A more important reason is that North Korea will attempt to improve its citizens’ living conditions as it celebrates the 75th anniversary of the Workers’ Party this October; from here, it might be possible for Pyongyang to then focus on displaying their ‘military power’ to prove their ability to resist against the United States. North Korea will now likely focus on managing their messages against the United States.

Since the beginning of this year, North Korea has refrained from actual ‘shocking actions’ against the U.S., but it has also been revealing its intentions for ‘strengthening nuclear power’ as a long-term solution instead. Kim Jong-un has put together an extended meeting amongst the Central Military Commission on May 24th and threatened to “take nuclear control to the next level and operate the strategy force as an elevated turbulent state.” At the 2nd anniversary of the Singapore Summit on June 12th, the Secretary of Foreign Affairs Ri Sun-Kwon stated that “our goal is to build our definite strength in order to manage America’s long-term military threats.” At the preliminary session of the Central Military Commission on June 23rd where the decision to “defer military actions against South Korea” was made, it was stated that “national measures will be studied in order to strengthen deterrence;” along with Kim Yo-Jong stating at the discourse on July 10th that “more consideration is needed regarding improvements in countermeasures against America’s hostile policies against North Korea.”

North Korea has no choice but to stall on denuclearization until after the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. However, North Korea will take steps to show off their ‘nuclear and missile process improvements’ and continue to undertake threatening behaviour in order to keep America’s attention. Such provocations include the launch ceremony of the latest SLBM submarine (3,000 tons, believed to have the capacity to load 3 polaris-type Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs) at the Sinpo South Shipyard, a test launch of a SLBM, obvious production of nuclear materials (Highly Enriched Uranium and Plutonium)), and a large-scale military parade, including the display of ICBMs for the 75th anniversary of the Workers’ Party.