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The Outlook for Inter-Korean Relations after North Korea's 8th Party Congress

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A three-hour [military parade](#) and a fireworks display in Pyongyang on January 14 punctuated the end of the 8th Congress of the Workers Party of Korea. The 8th Congress, which lasted eight days, was the first such high party gathering since 2016 and only the second since the 6th Congress was held in 1980. Such high-profile party events provide an opportunity to establish the direction for key domestic social and economic policies, but they also give indication of the direction North Korea's future international policies.

During the Congress, Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un was ambiguous about relations with
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the United States just days before Joseph R. Biden was to be sworn-in as President of the United States. In his major report to the party congress, Kim was confrontational, saying that the United States is North Korea's "foremost principal enemy." He declared "the real intention of its policy toward the DPRK will never change, whoever comes into power in the U.S." But the Supreme Leader also later added, "A key to establishing a new

relationship between the DPRK and the U.S. lies in the U.S. withdrawal of its hostile policy towards the DPRK." This could indicate that Kim might be willing to resume talks with Washington, but it also clearly suggests that this will only be on Pyongyang's terms.

One of the key foreign policy issues at the Party Congress in Pyongyang and also the issue Seoul was carefully watching is the future of the relationship between North and South. North Korea has been less than cooperative in its attitude toward its southern neighbor during the past year. Statements at the Congress in Pyongyang and comments from President Moon in Seoul and from South Korea's Unification Ministry have focused on the inter-Korean relationship.

President Moon Jae-in his New Year's Speech Calls for Improved North-South Relations

South Korean President Moon Jae-in has been increasingly sensitive about making progress with the North as his single-five year presidential term comes to an end in just 16 months. Moon was Chief of Staff to President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008), who also sought progress in North-South relations, but who had only one meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il just a few months before Roh's presidential term expired. Roh's effort to improve inter-Korean relations was cut short by the end of his term in office.

President Moon, in his New Year address just three weeks ago on the eve of the North's Party Congress, called for engaging with the North. But he also affirmed the importance of the U.S. relationship: "The Government will strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance in step with the launch of the Biden Administration." But Moon also reaffirmed his interest in bringing the United States and North Korea together: "At the same time, we will make our final effort to achieve a major breakthrough in the stalled North Korea-U.S. talks and inter-Korean dialogue."

Engagement with North Korea has been a hallmark of Moon's foreign policy agenda, and it was a key topic in his New Year speech. He expressed the "hope that the process of

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dealing with COVID-19 will initiate mutual benefit and peace,” as the two Koreas have done in dealing with other health problems. He said that “the broader cooperation expands, the further we can move along the path toward unification.” Recognizing the obstacle of cooperation in the era of the Covid pandemic, he said, “Our determination to meet at any time and any place and talk even in a contact-free manner remains unchanged.”

North Korea’s Hard Line Toward the South in 2020

In the six months leading up to the 8th Party Congress, North Korea took a tough stand on relations with the South. In May, Kim Yo-jong, sister of Kim Jong-un, issued a vicious statement attacking North Korean defectors for sending leaflets via balloon across the border from the South. She threatened: “South Korean authorities will be forced to pay a dear price if they let this situation go on.” If Seoul did not take action, she threatened, the South “had better get themselves ready for possibility of the complete withdrawal of the already desolate Kaesong Industrial Park . . . or shutdown of the north-south joint liaison office whose existence only adds to trouble, or the scrapping of the north-south agreement in the military field which is hardly of any value.”

North Korea underlined that it was less interested in rapprochement with the South than in getting its own way when a few days after these events, the North dramatically destroyed the large office building in Kaesong built by the South Korean government as a joint liaison office where the two Koreas maintained offices for communication and cooperation. The massive explosion demolished the two-year-old building that cost South Korea some \$70 million. It was, in the words of the North Korean official media, “tragically ruined with a terrific explosion.” The “tragic” action was, in fact, deliberate destruction by North Korea.

In December, clearly in response to the North’s demands, the government majority in the National Assembly adopted legislation banning the sending of balloons across the border into the North carrying propaganda leaflets, USBs, DVDs, Bible verses, and even cash. The legislation imposes stiff fines and jail terms for violators. The submissive response of the South to the North’s broadside on balloons could well encourage Pyongyang to make additional harsh demands on Seoul.

Kim Jong-un on Inter-Korean Relations at the 8th Party Congress

In his Report to the 8th Party Congress, Kim Jong-un called for solving “the basic problems in north-south relations.” He then ridiculed proposals from the South on cooperation:
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“Currently, the south Korean authorities are giving an impression that they are concerned about improvement of north-south relations by raising such inessential issues as anti-epidemic and humanitarian cooperation and individual tourism.” [North Korean practice is for “north” and “south” to be lower case.] Kim made it clear that his focus is winning concessions from the South on security issues:

“They [the South] are going against the implementation of the north-south agreement on guarantee of peace and military stability in the Korean peninsula in disregard of our repeated warnings that they should stop imports of latest military hardware and joint military exercises with the U.S. Worse still, they are getting crazier about modernization of armed forces. Labeling our development of various conventional weapons, which pertains entirely to the just exercise of our sovereignty, a ‘provocation.’”

Basically Kim demands that the South not procure the latest military hardware from the United States, and it must cease joint military exercises with the United States. The North on the other hand will continue to modernize its own military forces and further develop its own weapons. This one-sided demand would require South Korea to cease the modernization of its military and stop military training with its principal ally. Meanwhile, North Korea will be free to continue to bolster and improve its nuclear, missile and other weapons.

Seoul’s Ministry of Unification Gives a Hopeful Assessment

The initial South Korean government’s reaction to Kim Jong-un’s report to the 8th Congress was to reaffirm the South’s policy for improved North-South relations. The spokesperson of the South Korean Unification Ministry issued this comment at the conclusion of the North’s 8th Party Congress:

“The ROK Government remains consistent in pursuing denuclearization and settlement of peace on the Korean Peninsula, and improvement of inter-Korean relations. Our will to implement inter-Korean agreements is as firm as it has been stated many times, and we look forward to creating a new starting point for peace

Recognizing that the state of U.S. relations with North Korea will have a major impact on whether inter-Korean relations to improve, the Unification ministry spokesperson expressed optimism: “As the prospective inauguration of the new U.S. administration can be a great opportunity to improve bilateral relations between the U.S. and the DPRK, we look forward to restarting U.S.-DPRK relations as soon as possible.”

South Korean media described the Unification Ministry statement as suggesting the possibility for improvement in relations. South Korea’s key news agency, Yonhap, headlined its story on the Unification Ministry’s assessment of North-South relations after the Party Congress: “N.K. signals room for improvement in inter-Korean relations at party congress: [according to the Unification] ministry.” The KBS, South Korea’s principal radio and television broadcasting service headlined the KBS story: “Unification Ministry: N. Korea Communicated Will to Improve Inter-Korean Ties.”

The Moon Jae-in government has clearly shown a desire to work with the North to strengthen ties between the two countries in ways that will improve the quality of life and the welfare of their fellow Koreans in the North. As we noted, Moon called for cooperative efforts in dealing with common healthcare challenges, and the Covid pandemic in particular.

But the focus of Kim Jong-un was on changes in North and South that will enhance the North’s military capabilities and undermine those of the South. He called for the South to sever the security relationship with the United States and cease procurement to improve its military capabilities. He belittled President Moon’s proposal for cooperation on Covid and other humanitarian issues. Unfortunately, in the North the well-being of the people is not an important priority of the regime.

While the South is anxious to see positive opportunities for strengthening ties with the North in statements made during the 8th Party Congress, the humanitarian focus of the South and the military focus of the North clearly indicate that the two Koreas are still a good distance apart.

Both North and South discussed the United States in considering inter-Korean links. United States relations with the North under President Joe Biden are likely to shift away from Donald Trump's reality television approach to relations with Pyongyang. The United States will likely focus on the security realities of the authoritarian nuclear-armed North

Korean regime. At the same time, President Biden and the officials he has nominated to deal with foreign policy in his administration will likely be far more sensitive to relations with our allies, such as South Korea.

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Return to the Peninsula