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## THE PENINSULA

### **Kim Jong-un Changes Policy on Inter-Korean Reunification and Issues Threats of War**

Published January 19, 2024

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Category: [Inter-Korean](#)



In a historic break with a policy of most of the past eight decades, North Korea disbanded all of its government organizations which are focused on reunification with South Korea or which reflect a special relationship between the two Koreas. In a [lengthy speech](#) on January 15 to the Supreme People's Assembly (the North Korean parliament), Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un said that the North Korean people must understand that South Korea is the "primary foe and invariable principal enemy."

His speech made clear a new and different policy toward South Korea: "We cannot go along the road of national restoration and reunification together with the ROK clan that adopted as its state policy the all-out confrontation with our Republic, dreaming of the 'collapse of our government' and 'unification by absorption' and lost compatriotic consciousness, getting more vicious and arrogant in the madcap confrontational racket" (The English translation of that sentence is from the official North Korean news agency, KCNA—Even the awkward wording of the official news agency translation does not obscure the underlying hostility toward South Korea).

This change was approved at a meeting of the Party Central Committee two weeks earlier at the end of December, and the national parliament implemented the decision with the adoption of legislation at its sitting on January 15. In his lengthy policy speech to the

Parliament that day, Kim Jong-un announced: "We have formulated a new stand on the north-south relations and the policy of reunification and dismantled all the organizations we established as solidarity bodies for peaceful reunification at the current session of the Supreme People's Assembly."

It was clear from Kim's speech to the parliament that the changes are not merely the recognition of the fact that there are two separate countries (which is de facto acknowledged since the North Korea and South Korea are both recognized as full members of the United Nations). His address also reflected strong hostility toward South Korea. Kim said that the North Korean parliament had adopted legislation that clearly defined South Korea "as a foreign country," but he also said that the previous policy, "contradictory to reality," defined the South as a "partner for reconciliation and reunification and fellow countrymen." In fact, he said, the South is not only a "foreign country" but "the most hostile state" toward North Korea. He concluded that "It is necessary to take legal steps to legitimately and correctly define the territorial sphere where the sovereignty of the DPRK as an independent socialist nation is exercised."

In his speech to the parliament, Kim called on appropriate officials to correct "in the relevant paragraph of our constitution" the misrepresentation of the North and the South as "fellow countrymen" and "80 million compatriots." Such language must not be "used in the political, ideological, mental and cultural life of our people." He further said that "education should be intensified to instill into them [our people] . . . the firm idea that ROK is their primary foe and invariable principal enemy." He added that it is necessary to remove from the North Korean constitution such expressions as "northern half" and "independence, peaceful reunification and great national unity," as well as remnants of the past era such as phrases like "north and south Koreas with consanguineous and homogenous relations" and "peaceful reunification."

The South Korean newspaper *Hankyoreh* on January 15, said that the North Korean Workers Party newspaper, *Rodong Sinmun*, announced that the North Korean parliament had disbanded a series of organizations focused on changes with South Korea because inter-Korean relations were "completely fixed as the relations of two hostile and belligerent countries, not those of fellow countrymen." These organizations include the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland, the North Headquarters of the Pan-national Alliance for Korea's Reunification, the Consultative Council for National Reconciliation, and other similar organizations.

The shift in policy is already taking place. Just a day or so after Kim Jong-un announced in his speech to parliament the change in the relationship between the two Koreas, North Korean state media broadcast a map highlighting only the North in red. That same image previously broadcast by the media always showed the entire Korean peninsula highlighted in red ([Korea Herald](#), [Korea Times](#)).

### **Hostility and Threats Toward South Korea and the United States**

Kim Jong-un's speech not only played down the possibility of unification of North and South, but he was also quite aggressive and threatening against the South. In his effort to emphasize the separation between the two Koreas, he said "it is necessary to take legal steps to legitimately and correctly define the territorial sphere where the sovereignty of the DPRK as an independent socialist nation is exercised." He called for "measures to thoroughly block all of the channels of north-south communication along the border."

Kim even called for changes in steps taken by and identified with his father, Kim Jong-il. Symbolically, he called for removing the “Monument to the Three Charters of National Reunification,” a large memorial built in Pyongyang in 2001 which towers over the road from Pyongyang south to the DMZ between the two Koreas to memorialize the North Korean proposal for unification, which was made by his father Kim Jong-il. The monument was built by Kim Jong-il. In his address to parliament, Kim Jong-un said, “We should also completely remove the eye-sore ‘Monument to the Three Charters for National Reunification’ . . . and take other measures so as to completely eliminate such concepts as ‘reunification,’ ‘reconciliation’ and ‘fellow countrymen’ from the national history of our Republic.”

While the comments were particularly bellicose, he was careful to add that he was not threatening military action against the South: “I reaffirm that the strongest absolute strength we are cultivating is not a means of preemptive attack for realizing unilateral ‘reunification by force of arms’ but the the capabilities for legitimate self-defense.”

But he also made clear that use of force was not ruled out. “We will never unilaterally unleash a war if the enemies do not provoke us,” but he continued, “The enemies should never misjudge this as our weakness.” He called South Korea “the most hostile state” and said “instability of the regional situation is soaring due to the U.S.-led escalation of military tensions.” He was careful to add “We do not want war, but we also have no intention of avoiding it. 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.” He said “The war will terribly destroy” the Republic of Korea and “put an end to its existence.” He also threatened that war “will inflict an unimaginably crushing defeat upon the U.S.”

Leader Kim also made clear that any conflict would be an all-out struggle. He brandished North Korea’s nuclear power: “If the enemies ignite a war, our Republic will resolutely punish the enemies by mobilizing all its military forces including nuclear weapons.” Kim Jong-un’s rhetoric appears to be sharper, more assertive, and more belligerent than in the recent past. Bluster from Pyongyang has always been an element of North Korean strategy, but some of the latest statements suggest a willingness for greater risk-taking by the leadership.

### **Tighter Domestic Control in the North Encouraging a More Assertive Foreign Policy**

In the post-pandemic era, as North Korea begins to reopen conditions remain under much tighter control than in the past, consistent with the bellicose bluster from Kim. The tough action taken by the government to deal with the COVID pandemic over the past three years has given the regime an incentive and opportunity to tighten its control in the North.

Although North Korea’s tightly controlled economy showed positive signs over the last decade or two that consumer goods could be traded in a relatively open consumer market. The government was suspicious of the free market, but significant progress benefiting the population was made. The consumer market was one of the first casualties of the COVID pandemic clampdown, with central government using the pandemic as the excuse for imposing tighter economic control. Even with the waning of COVID, the

consumer market remains under tight central control, and the free market has not revived. Furthermore, the economy severely contracted during the pandemic, which is giving the economic managers greater control.

Another area of significantly tighter government control in North Korea is border control. Preventing the spread of COVID provided strong incentive to control flow of people into and out of North Korea. The result has been that the number of refugees successfully leaving the country has dropped dramatically. Even before the pandemic, Kim Jong-un was successful in reducing the number of North Koreans leaving the country and resettling elsewhere. But the COVID pandemic brought dramatically tighter controls over the movement of people in North Korea, and the number of refugees successfully leaving North Korea to resettle in South Korea and elsewhere plummeted. In 2019, the last year before COVID, the number of North Koreans resettled in South Korea was 1,046. In 2020, the first year after the arrival of COVID, the number of North Korean refugees to reach the South dropped to 229, and in 2021 that number dropped to only 63 individuals arriving in South Korea. As the COVID pandemic has waned, the intensity of government control does not appear to have eased.

Another element that may be encouraging Pyongyang to be more assertive in its foreign policy could be the more friendly relationship between Pyongyang and Moscow. The recent summit between Putin and Kim Jong-un in Russia and reports of the importance Russia places on purchasing military hardware and ammunition from North Korea, may have emboldened the Kim. The very recent visit of North Korea's foreign minister to Moscow, where she was given an audience with the Russian leader also highlights the importance of the relationship between the two countries.

Pyongyang is likely to be more assertive because United States is more heavily engaged in international issues of concern beyond the Korean Peninsula. The conflict involving Israel and Hamas forces in Gaza has led to U.S. military involvement with the Houthis of Yemen in protecting Red Sea shipping routes. The United States has supported Ukraine in its ongoing conflict with Russia, which is continuing. China is also becoming more assertive vis-à-vis the United States, with indications of problems involving Taiwan as well as other areas. The domestic political situation in the United States, with a particularly contentious presidential election coming up later this year, also suggests U.S. involvement in Korean issues may be less focused than it has been in the past.

The result of these international and domestic conditions in the United States may lead North Korea to be more assertive in its foreign policy toward South Korea and more oppressive in the treatment of its own people.

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Return to the Peninsula

