

# Notes on Strategy

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## Who blocks the way for springtime on the Peninsula?

*How Deputy Director Kim Yo Jong's Statement was a missed opportunity*

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## Who blocks the way for springtime on the Peninsula?

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The statement made by the Workers' Party of Korea's Deputy Director Kim Yo Jong on March 15 was unusual. Granted, it is not out of the ordinary for North Korea to overreact to a South Korea-U.S. joint military exercise. Many of past statements from Pyongyang have been more inflammatory than this one. Nevertheless, it stood out because of how North Korea outlined the concrete measures it would be taking including "closure" of the Committee for Peaceful Reunification of the Country; "dissolution" of Kungangsan International Tourism Bureau and other organizations; and "abrogation" of the Inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement. If these measures are indeed put into motion, the inter-Korean relationship will collapse.

North Korea lists three reasons for its actions. First, it insists South Korea passed on a crucial opportunity to return to the "spring of three years ago", despite Kim Jong Un offering it. At the Eighth Party Congress, Chairman Kim demanded that the South resolve "fundamental problems" such as the introduction of advanced weapons systems and the suspension of South Korea-U.S. joint military exercises. Pyongyang is insisting that Seoul take responsibility for these actions. Second, while the manner in which joint military exercises are carried out may have shifted to computer-based simulations and command post exercise, Pyongyang claims that it doesn't change the fact that Seoul is preparing for war. Lastly, North Korea argues that South Korea's actions

demonstrate that it has fully internalized Pyeongyang as its enemy and only views North Korea as an adversary to be fought with in the battlefield. Pyongyang perceives Seoul's actions as reaching a point of no return.

North Korea thinks that fanning the flames of inter-Korean hostility is a justified response to South Korea's missteps. But North Korea's flawed logic ignores the principle of reciprocity which is the basis of all relationships. North Korea is apprehensive of South Korea's new weapon systems and joint military exercises, but South Korea is just as guarded. The South has kept vigilant watch over the North's development of nuclear weapons, testing of weapons systems, and military exercises. As if to add fuel to the fire, North Korea has declared plans to further develop its nuclear arsenal. The country states that it is well within its rights to fortify the national military to defend its people and territory. It is problematic that South Korea — a country without nuclear weapons — is being criticized for participating in a significantly scaled-down version of the joint military exercise. And to call it “practice” for invading North Korea? Pyongyang is clearly measuring against a double standard.

The COVID-19 pandemic was not the only reason for cutting back on this year's joint military exercise. It was the product of Seoul's efforts to persuade Pyongyang to resume the peace process. Nevertheless, North Korea has lambasted South Korea for not completely ceasing joint exercises, even mentioning the possibility of terminating the Inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement. This carries implications for the rest of the world and poses a security dilemma for both countries who continue to suspect each other's intentions and military ambitions — yet both countries insist that the ramping up of their own military is for defense purposes. The two Koreas share a border, and one side's introduction of a new weapons system and exercising self-defense drills only increases tension on the other side. To compensate, arms control should be strengthened through enhanced mutual

observation and verification. In this connection, the military agreement is a crucial foundation for arms control on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea, however, threatens to end this agreement, which is not only counterintuitive but counterproductive.

If the military agreement is terminated, it will be more costly to manage security for both sides. In South Korea, voices calling for full-scale joint military exercises will only be amplified. If large-scale joint drills are resumed, which the South had done in the past, North Korea's fears will inevitably increase. In short, there is a high possibility that the end of the military agreement will eventually lead to a security dilemma followed by an intensified arms race. Is this the outcome that North Korea is seeking?

Meanwhile, North Korea maintains a hardline stance on ceasing cooperation and exchange with South Korea who continues to pursue hostile actions. Since the failure of the Hanoi Summit, most exchanges between the two countries have been suspended. For a country that has repeatedly turned down Seoul's invitations, it makes little sense for North Korea to dismiss conciliatory gestures and deem them futile without even having made an attempt to reciprocate. Most notably, North Korea has shown little interest in participating in an inter-Korean military committee that will discuss 'fundamental issues' such as the South Korea-U.S. military drills. If the drill is indeed a fundamental problem for the two Koreas, why does the North refuse to actively negotiate its terms with the South?

The South Korean government has remained steadfast in its attempts to initiate dialogue and reduce the scale of joint drills despite being met with rebuffs from North Korea. This is not because Seoul is a pushover, but because it understands that reinstituting the peace process will give both sides greater peace of mind. North Korea continues to cast aspersions and exhibit ill-will, as they have with statements

like “South Koreans will have an extremely painful future ahead of them.” This will only delay the peace process and restoration of inter-Korean relations. It is not in North Korea’s best interest to dismiss the South’s offers.

The suspended peace process in 2018 and 2019 ended up severing inter-Korean relations. If the peace process — which had been carried out through several inter-Korean summits and the North Korea-U.S. summit in Singapore — had made progress in Hanoi in the early spring of 2019, the two Koreas would not have been in a stalemate for over two years. The Biden administration has not yet come out with concrete North Korean policy, but highlights the importance of working with South Korea as its ally. In line with this approach, the South Korean government needs to consolidate its efforts in encouraging the U.S. to participate in the peace process and to pick up where they left off at the Singapore Summit. Likewise, North Korea needs to adopt a more amenable and cooperative stance so that the diplomatic seeds planted by South Korea can blossom. It is not the time for pressure, but the time for the South and the North to prepare for spring.