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## The Background and Prospects of Changes in North Korea's Concept of its "Main Enemy"

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On October 11, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un gave commemorative remarks at the opening of the "Defense Development Exhibition Self-Defense 2021." One notable aspect of his speech is the claim that North Korea's "main enemies" are not South Korea or the United States, and that its strengthening of defense capabilities are not aimed at South Korea. Such claims can be said to deviate from the conventional understanding of North Korea's concept of its main enemy.

North Korea has long defined the South Korea-United States military trainings as preparations for an "invasion" of the North and thus, a threat to the country. In addition, the mandated tour of the "Sinchon Museum of American War Atrocities" for all North Korean residents and students became a symbol of the country's commitment to instilling anti-Americanism. Such phenomena indicate that realistically for North Korea, its "main enemy" are "South Korea and the United States," the perpetrators of their joint military training. Moreover, the mission and purpose of North Korea's military can be said to confront South Korea and the United States as

threats. In this sense, Kim Jong-un's remarks regarding the "main enemy" can be seen as a modification of North Korea's previous concept of its "main enemy," which has traditionally, since the Korean War, implied the South Korean and United States' forces.

It remains unclear whether Kim Jong-un's remarks on the revised meaning of the main enemy are merely a gesture of appeasement toward South Korea and the United States or whether he is seeking meaningful change in the country's conceptualization of the main enemy.

Regarding the background of Kim Jong-un's altered claims of the main enemy, it should be noted that the speech was broadcasted to North Korean citizens and the military through state television. Thus, attention should be given to the contributing background factors inside North Korea, separate from the possibility of the act as a gesture of appeasement toward South Korea and the United States.

The current generational changes observed in North Korea's social composition and the military have progressed at a rapid pace since Kim Jong-un assumed power. What these generational changes suggest is that amid the reality North Korea faces, it has become difficult for the "South Korea-United States main enemy argument" to maintain its persuasiveness.

A young, 18-year-old North Korean soldier who would have fought against the United States' and South Korean forces in June 1950 is now 90 years old. In another instance, a 10-year-old North Korean elementary school student who may have directly witnessed family tragedies or injuries perpetrated by, therefore acknowledging, the main enemy of South Korean and United States' forces is now more than 80 years old. The estimated population size of this age group is only about 100,000 out of 25 million North Koreans.

In the case of the North Korean military, the junior officers of the "March of Suffering" in the early to mid-1990s, who were commissioned in their twenties as second lieutenants of the Korean People's Army, have grown into high-ranking officers, equal to or above the position of division commanders. Unlike the previous generation of officers who served during a period of socialist prosperity in the 1960s, this group can be described as a newcomer generation who grew up under the influence of North Korea's marketization and external trends. It is not an exaggeration to say that the predominant challenges this generation has been fighting against are not American or South Korean soldiers, but rather economic hardship and intensive training.

The fact that there are almost no remaining members of North Korean generations that are hostile to South Korea and the United States by direct experience, reflects the

difficulty of retaining any real meaning in the “South Korea-United States main enemy” argument, anymore. As of 2020, as indicated by the number of North Korean defectors entering the South amounting to a total of 33,000, the reality is that South Korea has become the object of admiration rather than North Korea’s main enemy.

In his commemorative remarks, Kim Jong-un also emphasized that “our external efforts for peace are never an act of giving up the right to self-defense.” This point can be interpreted as aiming to dispel concerns and misunderstandings that may rise among certain classes within North Korea. Therefore, Kim Jong-un’s altered claims about North Korea’s main enemy can be assessed as an expression of his will to reflect changes in North Korea’s reality, beyond simple means of appeasement.

If North Korea’s changed conceptualization of its main enemy and efforts for furthering peace materialize into reality, this will accelerate the decline in the status of the North Korean military. In turn, this decline will provide a positive opportunity for various changes in the North Korean regime.

Keywords: Defense Development Exhibition, Kim Jong-un, South Korea-United States Joint Military Training, Main Enemy, Anti-Americanism, Korean People’s Army