

EAI COLUMN

July 6, 2015
ISBN 979-11-86226-41-4
95340

Translation
EAI Research Fellow
Benjamin A. Engel
Jaesung Ryu

—
EAI Intern
Jihyun Ban
Seungwan Kim
Ekaterina Mozhaeva

Acknowledgement
This column was originally published in Korean on the EAI website on February 11, 2015 and can be found [here](#).

EAI Column presents fresh, constructive opinions and policy suggestions on Korean society and politics as well as East Asian security and international relations issues from recognized experts.

Please acknowledge the source of this article if used as a citation.

The EAI is a nonprofit and independent research organization in Korea. The contents of this article do not necessarily reflect the views of EAI.

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D
Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu
Seoul 100-786
Republic of Korea

© EAI 2015

www.eai.or.kr

Reading Kim Jong Un's Fortune through the North Korean New Year's Address

Young-Sun Ha

Chairman of the EAI Board of Trustees/Seoul National University

At the beginning of each year, as an annual tradition, I read North Korea's New Year address. This year was no exception. Since I wrote an article last year entitled, "Prospects for North Korea 2014: Hermeneutic Interpretation of the New Year's Address" ([EAI Commentary No.32] 2014/01/27), I thought it better not to repeat the same commentary this year. However, many domestic and foreign analyses of Kim's New Year speech missed the mark. Thus this paper will try to look through a crystal ball and predict in more detail what will happen in North Korea during the upcoming year.

First, there is no fundamental change between this year and last year in the address's structure. It evaluates 2014 as, "a year of brilliant triumph in which the foundations for hastening the final victory on all fronts of building a thriving nation were consolidated firmly and the invincible might of the DPRK was demonstrated under the leadership of the Party." And presents its 2015 rallying cry as, "Let the whole nation join efforts to open up a broad avenue to independent unification in this year of the 70th anniversary of national liberation!" To achieve this goal, the address utilizes the framework of "strengthening three revolutionary capabilities," which has guided North Korea's vision for over half a century, and emphasizes the three great revolutionary capabilities: domestic capability, unification capability, and international capability.

Kim Jong Un's Fortune during the First Part of the Year: International Capability May Weaken

In order to read Kim Jong Un's fortune in 2015, we should consider the tasks North Korea will seek to complete this year and the measures that will be used to accomplish those tasks given that North Korea's view of the world remains unchanged. In his annual State of the Union address, U.S. President Barack Obama staunchly reiterated a point made in his commencement remarks at West Point Military Academy earlier in May when he said that, "the question is not whether the U.S. leads in the world, but how." The President emphasized combining military and diplomatic power as a key tool to achieve this aim. More specifically, he gloated over the success of sanctions on Russia, called for restraint against implementing new sanctions against Iran as negotiations over its nuclear program progress, and stated that Congress should immediately work to lift the embargo placed on Cuba many decades ago. Even though Obama did not mention North Korea, the U.S. intends to exercise its diplomatic might through strict sanctions.

At the end of last year, North Korea carried out a cyber attack against Sony Pictures which produced *The Interview*, a comedy movie about an assassination plot against Kim Jung Un. President Obama deemed this attack a threat to U.S. national

“ The North has not accepted the Park Geun-hye administration’s various ideas for improving inter-Korean relations. as long as there are no firm agreements on basic principles, slight improvements in inter-Korea relations are nothing but a house of cards in a gusty wind.”

security and, as a result, issued an executive order placing a new round of financial sanctions on North Korea given his appraisal of the success of the 2005 sanctions. In addition to financial sanctions, the U.S. is cooperating with its allies, including South Korea, Japan, and Australia, to affect change in North Korea on issues such as cyber attacks and human rights, including taking action following the UN Commission of Inquiry’s (COI) report on North Korea released in February 2015. The U.S. has used bilateral and trilateral cooperation with South Korea and Japan to increase deterrence against the North Korean threat. At the same time, the U.S. has remained open to the possibility of six-party talks, demanding, as a precondition, that North Korea make at least a minimal effort of taking steps towards truthful and concrete denuclearization.

North Korea has criticized the Obama administration’s North Korea policy, making accusations such as “The United States and its vassal forces are resorting to the despicable ‘human rights’ racket as they were foiled in their attempt to destroy our self-defensive nuclear deterrent and stifle our Republic by force.” They consider the prospects of six-party talks based on preconditions as a political intrigue to force disarmament. Finally, North Korea argues that President Obama’s recent “North Korea internal breakdown scenario” reveals the United States’ true intention which is to avoid starting a dialogue. The Kim Jong Un regime is preparing respective countermeasures against various U.S. sanctions – financial, human rights, cyber, military – while stating that they are ready to suspend the fourth nuclear test and to have direct talks at any time if the U.S. stops the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise in March. Furthermore, the administration

proclaims that, “as long as the enemy persists in its moves to stifle our socialist system, we will consistently adhere to the military-first (*songun*) policy and the line of promoting the two fronts simultaneously (*byungjin*) and firmly defend the sovereignty of the country and the dignity of the nation, no matter how the international situation and the structure of relations of our surrounding countries may change.”

Kim Jong Un’s fortune for the first half of the year depends on how well he deals with the U.S.’s North Korea strategy. The major roadblocks are that North Korea’s efforts to strengthen its international capability are being hindered by the U.S.’s complex sanction package, which is working better than before, and North Korea’s difficulties in finding support for the *byungjin* policy which states that North Korea will develop its economy while simultaneously developing nuclear weapons. Therefore, if North Korea fails to minimize damage from sanctions and to take an advantageous position in negotiations, Kim Jong Un’s attempt to “defend the socialist state” will face turbulent waters.

Kim Jong Un’s Fortune for the Middle Part of the Year: Difficulty in Improving Inter-Korean Relations

In middle of the year, in addition to the weakening of North Korea’s international capability, Kim Jung Un will have difficulty improving relations with South Korea and reinforcing his unification capability. Throughout his speech, Kim Jung Un preserves the basic structure of last year’s Three Charters for National Unification, Struggle for Security and Peacekeeping, and Improving Inter-Korean Relations, and explains it in more detail. First, Kim Jong Un

“In the end, North Korea cannot expect economic growth using the same tactics and the path to becoming a modern nation will be fraught with difficulties.”

states that eliminating the risk of war on the Korea peninsula, easing tensions and managing peaceful environment are essential to opening the “great path towards independent unification.” Next, he emphasizes regime protection according to the Three Charters for National Unification, the key elements of which include independence, peace, and great national solidarity. Lastly, he explicitly conveys that, “We think that it is possible to resume the suspended high-level contacts and hold high-level talks if the South Korean authorities are sincere in their desire to improve inter-Korean relations through dialogue. And there is no reason why we should not hold a summit meeting if the atmosphere and environment for it are created.” The New Year address also includes preconditions for improving inter-Korean relations including: halting military drills with the United States, banning the distribution of leaflets, and the removal of the sanctions regime placed on North Korea by the Lee Myung-bak administration in 2010, etc.

The North has not accepted the Park Geun-hye administration’s various ideas for improving inter-Korean relations. Instead, the North has only suggested conditions that promote unification in their own way, based upon the “Three Charters for National Unification.” Therefore, as long as there are no firm agreements on basic principles, slight improvements in inter-Korea relations are nothing but a house of cards in a gusty wind.

Kim Jong Un’s Fortune for the Last Part of the Year: Limits of Domestic Capability Building

The last crucial point for accurately interpreting Kim Jong Un’s fortune for the

latter part of the year assesses how he could succeed in building up his domestic capability. During the short period following the execution of Jang Sung Taek, North Korea has experienced fragile political instability and economic development. In the address, North Korea declares, “Uphold the slogan, ‘Let us all turn out in the general offensive to hasten final victory in the revolutionary spirit of *Paektu!*’ Bearing in mind the soul and mettle of *Paektu!*, we should become honorable victors in the general offensive to exalt the dignity of our socialist country and promote its prosperity on the strength of ideology, arms and science and technology.” However, as long as North Korea keeps pushing its *byungjin* policy, which is now in its third year, and it remains under international financial sanction for nuclear development, the country will find it impossible to attract global scale financial support and investment which is essential for its “domestic capability.” In the end, North Korea cannot expect economic growth using same tactics and the path to becoming a modern nation will be fraught with difficulties.

South Korea’s Unification Policy in 2015

Having evaluated Kim Jong Un’s future using the three key areas of domestic capability, international capability, and inter-Korea capability, it would be helpful to use the same criteria to read South Korea’s fortune for the this year. Above all, cooperation with the U.S. is vital to enhancing South Korea’s international capability. The U.S. will continue its push of strong and complex controls on North Korea, yet this policy cannot be maintained forever and South Korea should be ready to actively participate in diplomatic negotiations once the U.S.

returns to the table. If South Korea hopes to transform the status quo and move from sanctions to cooperation, it also needs to take on the role of mediator between the U.S. and China. Moreover, in order to buttress international capability, Korea should be a reliable partner for countries with a stake in negotiations with North Korea such as Japan and Russia.

Various exchange and cooperation programs that are attractive to North Korea to strengthen inter-Korea relations should be established. However, to put these programs into practice, both sides should begin the process of forming an agreement on the basic principles of inter-Korean relations for exchanges and cooperation. In order to do this, detailed plans aimed at improving relations should be prepared so that sanctions can eventually be lifted with deeper cooperation to follow. There needs to be a genuine discussion and plan for a nuclear free, peaceful and prosperous Korean Peninsula that respects the dual system approach.

Finally, an advanced unification process in the 21st century requires strengthening domestic capability as well as improving inter-Korean relations and international capability. To this end, politicians must move beyond the stale, old-fashioned arguments among conservatives and progressives and discuss and develop new unification policies. Creative ideas are needed to implement a 21st century-style, 'complex' unification program, or in other words a unification program that requires multiple approaches in various areas by many interested actors that enables both the South and North to operate both independently and cooperatively. ■

— *Young-Sun Ha* is the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the East Asia Institute, and also a professor emeritus at Seoul National University. He currently serves as a member of President Park Geun-hye's civilian National Security Advisory Panel. Dr. Ha received his Ph.D in political science from the University of Washington.