

The Korean Peninsula Enters an Era of Arms Race

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The launch of a cruise missile by North Korea on September reaffirms the increasing severity of the security environment surrounding Japan.

According to Rodong Sinmun newspaper, North Korea “successfully test-fired its newly developed long-range cruise missile on Sept. 11 and 12.” The cruise missile “flew along the set elliptical and figure-8 flight trajectory for 7,580 seconds (about 2 hours and 6 minutes) and hit a target 1,500 kilometers away,” it said. In addition, the warhead missile launched on the 15th flew about 750 kilometers and is estimated to have fallen within Japan’s exclusive economic zone, and North Korea released a video of the missile being launched from a railroad car.

When North Korea launches a missile or takes other military action, its intentions are always questioned, and this time, too, there are three ways to view it. The first is that it was to strengthen defense and deterrence, the second is that it addressed domestic political purposes (domestic control and raising national prestige), and the third is that it was meant as a message to the outside world. These are not mutually exclusive, but in light of North Korea’s developments since Chairman Kim Jong-un defined relations with the United States as a long-term war at the Fifth Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee the Workers’ Party of Korea at the end of 2019, it can be said that North Korea is currently placing emphasis on the first objective.

Looking again at the first point, at the 8th Party Congress in January 2021, Chairman Kim expressed his intention to strengthen the nation’s defense capabilities, including nuclear weapons. Starting with the miniaturization and reduction in weight of nuclear weapons, he listed as his goals and tasks the development of tactical nuclear weapons, the production of super-large nuclear warheads, the upgrading of nuclear first-strike and retaliatory strike capabilities, the possession of nuclear submarines and underwater-launched nuclear strategic weapons, the operation of military reconnaissance satellites, and the development of unmanned surveillance aircraft. In this connection, it should be

noted that “the development of the long-range cruise missile, a strategic weapon of great significance in achieving the key objectives of the Five-Year Plan for the Development of National Defense Science and Weapon Systems set out by the Eighth Party Congress” has been promoted in the past two years in accordance with the process of developing a scientific and reliable weapons system. It was not clear in January that North Korea was working to strengthen its defense capabilities in accordance with this Five-Year Plan, and the two-year period reminds us that it has been steadily developing weapons since the February 2019 Hanoi U.S.-North Korea summit.

With regard to the second point, the Kim Jong-un regime has been making efforts to tighten its internal control and encourage the people through a number of meetings since the 8th Party Congress, including three plenary meetings of the Party Central Committee since June 2021. In addition to the economic sanctions imposed by UN Security Council resolutions and other measures since last year, the country, suffering from a “triple burden” of a border blockade caused by the Novel Coronavirus and damage from typhoons and floods, is implementing a new five-year economic plan, but the situation is severe. In mid-June, the Third Plenary Meeting of the Eighth Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea adopted emergency measures to overcome the immediate food crisis, and the situation seems to be getting worse. One of the few achievements that can encourage the struggling people in such a situation is the development of weapons, and on September 9, the National Day, the Party held a “civilian and security armed forces review ceremony,” which is different from a “military parade” in which large weapons appear. However, it did not neglect to show off the results of its weapons development a few days later.

And from the third point of view, a high-level meeting between the Japan, the United States, and South Korea was scheduled to be held in Tokyo on Sep. 14 after the announcement of the cruise missile test, and Wang Yi, China’s foreign minister, was visiting South Korea when the ballistic missile was launched on Sep. 15. North Korea is probably trying to press the countries concerned to respond through diplomacy by demonstrating the sophistication of its missile capabilities. In particular, it may be expressing frustration, impatience, or disappointment that the Biden administration, which aims to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue through diplomacy, has not actually taken a proactive approach. At the above-mentioned plenary meeting in mid-June, Kim stressed the need to prepare for “both dialogue and confrontation” in relations with the U.S., but it is possible that he believes that the United States has not given a corresponding

response. Of course, the U.S. point of view is that it has already sent messages for dialogue many times. As an example, during a visit to South Korea in August, Sung Kim, Special Representative to North Korea (who also serves as ambassador to Indonesia), wrote an op-ed in *The Hankyoreh* newspaper in which he called for “readiness to meet with North Korea at any time and at any place.” However, North Korea would prefer a high-level exchange between the U.S. and North Korea, not a message from a working-level representative like Sung Kim. After three U.S.-North Korea summits, it will not be easy to interest Kim Jong-un to start practical negotiations once again.

So will North Korea continue to turn inward and remain a recluse? From the perspective of North Korea, whose borders continue to be sealed due to the pandemic, now is the time when it should, or rather must, focus on domestic issues. Even if it tries to turn the situation around, conducting dynamic diplomacy as it did in 2018 must be a considerable burden for North Korea because of the risk of contagion of the Novel Coronavirus. Therefore, the chances of making the February 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing similar to the PyeongChang Olympics, as South Korea’s Moon Jae-in administration hopes, do not seem to be that great. Nevertheless, it is also unlikely that negotiations between North Korea and the Biden administration will end in a deadlock. North Korea is probably carefully assessing the future of the strategic competition between the United States and China and the position of the North Korean issue in that competition, the diplomacy of the Biden administration after its withdrawal from Afghanistan and the situation in the United States in the run-up to the midterm elections, and trends in South Korean politics in the run-up to the South Korean presidential election next March (whether there will be a change of government between the ruling and opposition parties). If this is the case, it is likely that Kim Jong-un will try to establish a relationship with the Biden administration at least once. In such circumstances, it will be necessary to keep an eye on North Korea’s developments with an eye on the timeline of the Beijing Olympics in February and the South Korean presidential election in March, while keeping in mind the end of the year and the beginning of next year when Kim Jong Il is likely to issue an important message.

Finally, the recent missile launch by North Korea must be viewed in conjunction with South Korea’s submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) test, which was conducted on Sep. 15 in the presence of President Moon Jae-in. Simply put, South Korea and North Korea have entered a situation in which they are both engaged in an arms race

in the name of independence and self-defense. Not only North Korea, but also South Korea just announced earlier September a medium-term defense plan (2022-2026) to invest about 250 billion US dollars (300 trillion Korean won) over the next five years, and North Korea has made no secret of its awareness of this plan. For example, in a statement released on Sep. 15, Kim Yo-jong, Vice Department Director of the Party's Central Committee, said that North Korea's missile launch was "not a provocation aimed at anyone at a particular time, but a normal and self-defensive activity to carry out the priority tasks of the first year of the five-year plan for the development of national defense science and weapon systems," and that it was "the same as the South Korean medium-term plan for national defense."

For the past four years, the Moon administration has been pressing ahead with "self-defense" in order to regain control of wartime operations (OPCON) from the U.S. within his term in office. This is because the transfer of OPCON is contingent on the ROK military having sufficient capability to take the lead in defending the ROK. However, the OPCON transfer could not be realized within the term of the Moon administration and will be left to the next administration. In other words, the ROK's defense capability will continue to increase in the future. Japan, which is located next to the Korean Peninsula, cannot simply take a glance from the side at the continued military expansion of both North and South Korea. The question now more than ever is how Japan can play a constructive role in ensuring not only its own security but also the peace and stability of Northeast Asia.

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