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North Korea

North Korea's ICBM Strategy under the Current Situation of Ukraine

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North Korea has clarified its position to support Russia externally. Although the UN General Assembly (UNGA) overwhelmingly adopted a resolution on 2 March demanding that Russia immediately end its military operations in Ukraine, North Korea voted against it with other four countries: Belarus, Eritrea, Russia, and Syria. [1]

In the statement of 28 February by the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Korea said that “The root cause of the Ukraine crisis totally lies in the hegemonic policy of the U.S. and the West.” [2] The statement also said that “The U.S and the West, having devastated Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, are mouthing phrases about “respect for sovereignty” and “territorial integrity” over the Ukrainian situation which was detonated by themselves. That does not stand to reason at all.”

This shows North Korea's perception that the current situation in Ukraine is an extension of the past political situations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. In the past international situation, North Korea has repeatedly “learned” that only possession of nuclear weapons effectively protects “enemy” countries from Western intervention. [3] North Korea is not expected to comply with denuclearization and security under agreements with other countries. Meanwhile, North Korea's domestic media such as *Rodong Sinmun* (the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea) has not clarified their past basic political principle “Non-aligned” reporting on the invasion of Ukraine at the time of writing. Under the situation, Kim Jong-un conducted “Test-Launch of New-Type ICBM” instead of “satellite” launch on 24 March. This article outlines North Korea's political positions and their ICBM strategy including existing nuclear armament and the related geostrategic situations which is getting more complicated in the absence of a clear political direction for the countries involved.

Political compromise for “actual profit”

The basic political position of North Korea from the Kim Il-sung regime is “Non-aligned”. Based on the principle of “Non-aligned” and as a member of the “Third World”, North Korea has emphasized close relationship with national liberation movements especially related to African countries. Their experience of colonial rule and their historical experience in building a nation after independence have influenced their diplomatic relations. When the former Soviet Union confronted Romania and former Yugoslavia, North Korea supported Romania and former Yugoslavia. In the Sino-Vietnamese War which occurred in 1979, North Korea criticized China for invading Vietnam and did not support the former Soviet Union and China. Also, North Korea supported Cambodia when Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978.

If North Korea follows the principles of the Kim Il-sung era, they should criticize Russia's invasion against Ukraine and support Ukraine. But Pyongyang didn't support Ukraine because of their gradual political changes from “Non-aligned” to “actual profit” after the Kim Jong-il regime. And Pyongyang supported Russia externally in the current invasion against Ukraine. The “actual profit” gained by building a joint front with the countries against the US was prioritized over “Non-aligned”. But the population in North Korea still supports “Non-aligned” of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, which has been promoted in their ideological education. Explaining North Korea's support for Russia to the population is not easy. Therefore, only the external media such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website have expressed their political position. In pursuit of “actual profit”, Kim Jong-un was forced to make a political compromise.

From “satellite development” to official ICBM launch crossing “red line”

Under such a situation, Kim Jong-un conducted “Test-Launch of New-Type ICBM” on March 24. Since the ICBM “Hwasongpho-15” test of November 2017, North Korea has been conducting missile tests under the name of “satellite development.” However, on 25 March, a report by *Rodong Sinmun* removed the traditional “satellite development” camouflage and declared “test-launch of the new type ICBM Hwasongpho-17” in preparation for the war against the US. Kim Jong-un said in the article:

Noting that steadfast is the strategic choice and determination of our Party and government to keep bolstering the powerful nuclear war deterrence qualitatively and quantitatively so as to ensure the security of the country and cope with all kinds of potential crises in the future, he remarked that to equip with incomparably superior military attack capabilities means possessing the most reliable defence capabilities exemplified by a war deterrent. [4]

This clearly does not consider further sanctions by the UN Security Council or China's stance. Recent North Korean media reports have also expressed a clear confrontation with the US. The following reasons can be considered for Pyongyang's political stance, which is different from the conventional one: The first is the change in the world situation between November 2017, when North Korea launched the ICBM “Hwasongpho-15”, and today. China and Russia are currently not in favor of the Security Council's economic sanctions on North Korea in the context of the US-China conflict and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [5] The second is the intense conflict between the US and China. Pyongyang speculates that sanctions against North Korea by the UN Security Council may be ineffectual because of the right of veto of China and Russia in the context of the current situation.

Scrapped denuclearization and de-escalation policies

In the midst of the Ukraine crisis, North Korea is aiming to develop even more powerful ICBMs and other offensive weapons. On 28 March, *Rodong Sinmun* introduced Kim Jong-un's remarks in an article regarding the photo session held with those who contributed to “Test-Fire of Hwasongpho-17 Type”: “we will continue to attain the goal of reinforcing national defence capabilities, develop more of powerful strike means to make our People's Army equip with them.” [6]

Using “strike means” instead of “defence means” shows an aggressive character that is different from the conventional political policy. Also, Kim Yo-jong, a senior official and the sister of Kim Jong-un, issued two statements and said that Pyongyang would retaliate with nuclear strikes if South Korea launched a pre-emptive attack in April. [7] The North Korea's domestic media have reported extensively on the ICBM launch. [8]

North Korea will continue to develop weapons which serve as a “nuclear deterrent” to the US in pursuit of “actual profit” to obtain maximum performance at minimum cost. Further weapon development will also be an effective political appeal to population in North Korea, where the improvement of their livelihoods has not been achieved. [9]

On the other hand, the countries concerned cannot prevent further development of the “strike means”. The UN Security Council is not functioning. And sanctions applied only by the US has no substantial effect. In addition, South

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Korea is in the course of transition to the new regime and the political situation is unstable. The country's primary concern is to stabilize the domestic political situation. And the country cannot show their willingness to keep the initiative on the burning issue of the crisis in the region. Then opportunities for human exchange and dialogue between North and South Korea have been lost. Reunification of families separated by the Korean War (1950-1953) is stopped. And humanitarian aid to the population of the North and economic exchanges were suspended. Also rail or road networks between North and South Korea was suspended only one year after the connections in 2017. Moreover, Japan-South Korea relations remain deteriorating, and political cooperation between these countries regarding North Korea will be difficult.

In addition, the current situation of Ukraine is creating even more unstable and very volatile regional situations. Currently, Russia and China have shown themselves blatantly with sporadic passage of warships and military aircrafts to the areas around Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Russia and China stand together against the "common enemy" in the North Pacific. They also tend to stand together against the US, which has been evident in the North Pacific. [10] The initiative which has been kept on the issue of the Korean crisis was destroyed in the face of all the powers operating in the region. And the denuclearization and de-escalation policies concerning the entire peninsula moved away. The ball is back again in Kim Jong-un's court. And the geostrategic situation became more complicated compared with 2018, when Kim Jong-un took another "small step forward" by announcing the closure of the nuclear-related facilities under the condition presented by the US. For Pyongyang, the launch of ICBM Hwasongpho-17" may be just the beginning, or just a process for further nuclear development.

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[1] UN News, 2 March 2022, "General Assembly resolution demands end to Russian offensive in Ukraine".

[2] KCNA, 28 February 2022, "Answer of Spokesperson for Ministry of Foreign Affairs of DPRK".

[3] Pierre Rousset, IVP, 12 May 2017, "[A state of crisis in North-East Asia](#)".

[4] *Rodong Sinmun*, 25 March 2022, "Striking Demonstration of Great Military Muscle of Juche Korea: Successful Test-Launch of New-Type ICBM".

[5] In 2017, China and Russia agreed with the UN Security Council's economic sanctions on North Korea.

[6] *Rodong Sinmun*, 28 March 2022, "Respected Comrade Kim Jong-un Has Photo Session with Those Who Contributed to Successful Test-Fire of Hwasongpho-17 Type".

[7] *Rodong Sinmun*, 3 April 2022, "Press Statement of Kim Yo Jong, Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK" and 5 April 2022, "Press Statement of Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK Kim Yo Jong".

[8] On March 25, Korean Central Television reported the ICBM launch by "Leading actor Kim Jong-un" in a dramatic depiction of American movies.

[9] Kim Jong-un regime started with failed currency reforms launched in 2009. Since then, he has not made great strides in economic policy due to

triple suffering of economic sanctions, Covid-19 crisis, and flood damage.

[10] Pierre Rousset, IVP, 16 October 2018, "[The inter-Korean summit and the situation in North-East Asia](#)".