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Prospects for North Korea 2014:
Hermeneutic Interpretation of the New Year's Address

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The Discourse Structure of North Korea's
New Year's Address: 1-1-4-1-1

After ending 2013 with the execution of Jang Sung-taek, Kim Jong-un, the first secretary of the Worker's Party of North Korea, began the new year by giving his 2014 New Year's Address. While the people of the North were busy learning and memorizing the message of the Supreme leader, Pyongyang demanded that the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise, "Key Resolve," be called off. It also officially offered to halt all cross-border slandering and hostilities in order to prevent a nuclear disaster. This, however, created controversy among relevant parties that it was merely a "disguised peace offensive." Government officials and North Korean experts in South Korea and abroad seem lost inside the labyrinth of North Korea in 2014, divided between a chaotic rift of optimism and pessimism. In order to fully comprehend Kim Jong-un's 2014 blueprint and prepare appropriate countermeasures, it is of utmost importance to correctly read the New Year's Address.

North Korea's New Year's Addresses are far from mere propaganda statements. Through the speech, Kim attempts to analyze impending difficulties from the present perspective with a heavy influence from the past, as well as try to find solutions in his own way focused on a limited future horizon. In particular, as the address was carefully constructed according to guidelines established after the execution of Jang Sung-taek, a superficial reading or amateur content analysis of the address may be insufficient. Rather, the hermeneutic method called the "fusion of horizons" should be adopted in order to garner an in-depth understanding of the meaning found in between the lines.¹

The first step in understanding the 2014 address is determining the discourse structure. North Korea's New Year's Addresses have maintained a 1-1-4-1-1 structure for many years. The first 1 is to evaluate the passing year, the second 1 is to provide guidelines for the coming year, and the third 4 is to emphasize the strengthening of domestic *hyeongmyeong yeongnyang* or "capabilities for revolution" in the four major fronts of political ideology, military, economy, and culture. The fourth 1 stresses the strengthening of South Korean capabilities for revolution in order to move toward the unification of the peninsula. The last 1 discusses the strengthening of international capabilities for revolution to deter American imperialism and antagonistic "hostile policies" toward Pyongyang. Ever since Kim Il-sung laid out a new national political strategy in February 1964 of strengthening the three major capabilities for revolution - replacing the previous national strategy prioritizing the use of military force dating from the Korean War - his legacy has had an overwhelming influence over the perspective of his successors.²

The 2014 address maintains the 1-1-4-1-1 structure, reflective of North Korea's emphasis on the strengthening of the three major capabilities for revolution. The continuation of the discourse structure signifies that the Kim Jong-un regime's present perspective on domestic, regional (Korean peninsula), and

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international affairs remains unchanged. In other words, North Korea’s underlying understanding of the world from the perspective of enhancing the three capabilities for revolution has not changed. As the political landscape of the Korean peninsula in 2014 develops, a specific performance by the actor, North Korea, may change according to the particular stage driven by individual events. However, due to the limitations on the actor’s horizon, the general direction for the stage production is already established.

Assessment of 2013: A New Year of pyŏngjin nosŏn

After assessing the discourse structure, it is essential to specifically review the individual items of 1-1-4-1-1. The first 1, the evaluation of the passing year, now holds greater significance compared to last year due to the Jang Sung-taek incident. There still is considerable confusion regarding how to interpret Kim Jong-un’s reasoning behind the purge of Jang. The New Year’s Address, prepared promptly following the merciless killing of North Korea’s second-most powerful man, best demonstrates Kim Jong-un’s perspective on the execution.

The address evaluates 2013 by summarizing that “last year was a proud year in which the entire Party, the whole army and all the people waged an all-out offensive in support of the Party’s new line of developing the two fronts simultaneously (*pyŏngjin nosŏn*) and thus achieved brilliant successes in building a thriving socialist country and defending socialism.” The First Secretary Kim’s evaluation of 2013 as the year of new *pyŏngjin nosŏn*, a policy to develop the economy and nuclear programs simultaneously, indicates that he

was the driving force behind the selection and implementation of this “new line,” and, at the same time, the “new line” will continue to play a key role in 2014. The address also sums up the Jang incident by downplaying its significance vis-à-vis the “new line,” as follows: “In the seething period of the effort for building a thriving country last year we took the resolute measure of removing the factionalists lurking in the Party. As our Party detected and purged the anti-Party, counterrevolutionary factionalists at an opportune time and with a correct decision, the Party and revolutionary ranks were further consolidated and our single-hearted unity was solidified to the maximum.” In other words, the Jang incident can be summarized as an incident in which Kim Jong-un caught the anti-Party, counterrevolutionary factionalists red-handed during the process of executing the *pyŏngjin nosŏn* in 2013. For Kim Jong-un, the purge was not a consequence of political dissent on the basis of the national strategy. But, rather, it was a consolidation of the political ideology front to strengthen the domestic capabilities for revolution. A thorough understanding of the meaning of the Jang incident leads to an accurate forecast of the future of the Kim Jong-un regime. Although Jang’s execution shocked the North Korean people and the international community, it did not result in any considerable, substantive changes with regard to the regime’s underlying horizon or to the *pyŏngjin nosŏn* in the short run.

New Year’s Guidelines for State Affairs: The Golden Age of “Songun Korea”

Next, let us decipher the meaning behind the New Year’s guidelines for state affairs as outlined in the second 1 of the discourse struc-

ture. There are three gates guarding the labyrinth of North Korea in 2014: *songun* (military-first politics), *pyŏngjin* (dual policy line of economic development and nuclear development), and reform and openness. Whichever gate one may choose, the goal of the “advanced Republic” seems inconceivable. The address, however, reveals that Kim’s choice is to pursue the “golden age of *Songun* Korea.”

One must be careful in interpreting this guideline, encapsulating ideas of “*songun*” and the “golden age.” Dubbing the second year of *pyŏngjin nosŏn* as the “golden age of *Songun* Korea” illustrates that North Korea will hold fast to the military front of nuclear armament constructed since the *Songun* era. It also indicates that Kim Jong-un’s regime will usher in the halcyon days by firmly establishing the economic front buttressed by nuclear/military and political ideology fronts, consolidated through the purge of Jang Sung-taek.

Thus, contextually, “the golden age of *Songun* Korea” in 2014 embraces both the economy and nuclear program. Nevertheless, the address avoids any direct expression referring to *pyŏngjin* or the establishment of nuclear armament.

Four Major Fronts: Economy-Culture-Military-Political Ideology

Among the four major fronts in building domestic capabilities for revolution, the New Year’s Address devotes the largest portion to the economic front in realizing the national goal of “golden age of *Songun* Korea.” The agriculture, construction, science and technology sectors are emphasized as the “torch of innovations,” while impending tasks within the economic front are subsequently directed toward the industries of metallurgical and

chemical, electric-power and coal-mining, railroad and transportation, light manufacturing, fishing, and natural resources. The economic front is followed by the cultural front, including education and sports, and the military front emphasizing the buildup of the People’s Army and defense industries. Lastly, the consolidation of the political and ideological front is mentioned.

The four-major-front domestic capability part concludes with the underlining note that “the political and ideological position is a fortress that decides the victory and failure in the battle of defending socialism, and consolidating the revolutionary ranks politically and ideologically is the most important task facing us.” It further states that “in this...year ... we should solidify the Party organizationally and ideologically, train all the members of society to be equipped with *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism* and cement the single-hearted unity of the revolutionary ranks.”

Inter-Korean Relations: Three Principles of Korea Unification, Protection of Peace and Security, and Resolution of South-North Korean Relations

Following the New Year’s Address’ remarks on domestic capability, the prospects outlined for inter-Korean relations triggered incompatible views within the South. Conservatives view it as nothing new - a disguised peace offensive - while the progressives emphasize the necessity to sound out new possibilities for actual change. In order to properly interpret the New Year’s Address, it is necessary to read the Kim Jong-un regime’s perspective hermeneutically, beyond relying on the subjective interpretations of either conservatives or progressives.

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The New Year’s Address deals with the unification issue based on three main points. First, the three principles of Korean unification which have been maintained since Kim Il-sung introduced them in the 1970s continue to function as the cornerstone of Pyongyang’s unification policy. The principles include: independence without foreign interference, peaceful means without the use of force, and the great national unity transcending differences in ideas, ideologies, and system. “To resolve the reunification issue in keeping with the aspirations and desires of our fellow countrymen, we should reject foreign forces and hold fast to the standpoint of By Our Nation Itself. [...] The north and the south should uphold the principle of independence which is one of the three principles for national reunification and has been confirmed in the north-south joint declarations, hold fast to the standpoint of By Our Nation Itself, and respect and implement the declarations with sincerity.”

Second, while the North remarks, “We should make positive efforts to defend national security and peace,” it strongly condemns ROK-U.S. joint military drills. It wrote: “Should another war break out on this land, it will result in a deadly nuclear catastrophe.” Therefore, the North argues that the two Koreas together should forestall and ruin “the maneuvers for war and confrontation by the bellicose forces at home and abroad.”

Third, regarding improved relations between the South and North, it argues that: “A favourable climate should be established for improved relations between the north and the south. It is heartrending to see our nation partitioned by foreign forces, and it is more intolerable to see one side slinging mud at and showing hostility to the other. This will serve merely as an occasion for the forces who are

undesirous of seeing one Korea to fish in troubled waters. It is high time to put an end to such slander and calumny that bring no good to both sides, and they should desist from doing anything detrimental to national unity and reconciliation [...] We will join hands with anyone who opts to give priority to the nation and wishes for its reunification, regardless of his or her past, and continue to strive for better inter-Korean relations.”

On January 16, the North Korea Defense Commission released an important proposal entitled “Let’s Pave a Wide Avenue for Improving Inter-Korean Relations by the Concerted Efforts of Koreans by the Idea of By Our Nation Itself.” In it, the commission outlined realistic measures to end slander and military hostile behavior and prevent nuclear disasters, which was a more specific version of the inter-Korean relations content found in the New Year’s Address.³ In response, there is an ongoing “camouflaged peace offensive” debate between the South and North authorities. Among the three provisions of inter-Korean relations suggested in the New Year’s Address, the North prioritizes the third provision over the first and second, while the South emphasizes the first and second provisions. Thus, if North Korea’s intent is not indeed a “camouflaged peace offensive” but rather a new effort, the North should demonstrate a changed perspective toward the existing first and second provisions. Rather than merely responding to the North’s suggestion simply as a “camouflaged peace offensive,” South Korea should specify a “sincere peace suggestion” that enables it to sufficiently reveal the core context of Pyongyang’s suggestion.

“... the North clearly reveals an inherent contradiction in its approach toward strengthening its domestic economy for “Golden Age of Songun Korea” as its foremost priority, while unable to rid itself of the traditional perspective in the discussion of inter-Korean relations and international relations.”

International Relations: A Struggle for Anti-Imperialism

The picture of international relations as outlined in the 2014 New Year’s Address shows that the North did not rid itself of the traditional perspective of condemning the hostile policy of the U.S., as demonstrated in the following: “Last year, in the international arena, the imperialists persisted in interference and war moves threatening the independence of other sovereign states and the right of mankind to existence. Especially the Korean peninsula, the hottest spot in the world, was in a hair-trigger situation due to the hostile forces’ manoeuvres for a nuclear war against the DPRK, which posed a serious threat to peace and security in the region and the rest of the world.” Thus, North Korea emphasizes that: “We will defend our country’s sovereignty, peace and dignity by relying on our powerful self-defensive strength.”

Although North Korea avoids using a direct expression regarding the construction of its nuclear capability, it nonetheless emphasizes the danger of nuclear war, while at the same time indicating its unwillingness to abandon self-defensive strength, namely its nuclear weapons program. The 2014 New Year’s Address does not lead to a bright possibility for a new security perspective without nuclear weapons. To North Korea, its nuclear weapons program still remains a “last resort” for survival.

The Inherent Contradiction of the 2014 New Year’s Address

In the 2014 New Year’s Address, the North clearly reveals an inherent contradiction in its approach toward strengthening its domestic

economy for the “Golden Age of *Songun* Korea” as its foremost priority, while unable to rid itself of the traditional perspective in the discussion of inter-Korean relations and international relations. Based on the three principles of Korean unification, North Korea suggests a struggle for the peace and security of the nation and its people, while at the same time working to improve inter-Korean relations derived from the limited perspective of the North’s “Independence” and “Our Nation.” The South cannot accept such an incompatible approach of threatening and reassuring simultaneously. Thus, the North’s foreign policy toward the South would hardly lead to inter-Korean economic cooperation, which would create a considerable obstacle to Pyongyang’s economic development initiative in 2014.

It is unrealistic for the Kim Jong-un regime in 2014 to demonstrate a limited perspective in confronting the U.S. imperialists’ hostile policy toward the North with nuclear weapons while strengthening the domestic economy at the same time. As long as the North does not demonstrate sincerity in its denuclearization efforts to the international community, it will have to continue its “arduous march” in establishing a stronger economic position without any assistance from the international community.

In regard to strengthening the North’s domestic capability for revolution, the execution of Jang Sung-taek engendered little possibility for the near-future emergence of a potential challenger to Kim Jong-un on the political ideology front. Furthermore, the development of nuclear weapons and missile capabilities has established the foundation of the country’s ability to repel a foreign invasion. Regardless of North Korea’s utmost internal effort to establish the “Golden Age of *Songun*

Korea” through strengthening the economic front, it will fail to achieve an expected outcome without any significant improvement in inter-Korean, as well as international, relations. Kim Jong-un may hope to look back on 2014 as the ‘Golden age of *Songun* with unwavering pride’ in the 2015 New Year’s Address, but the prospect is rather gloomy.

Finding a Way out of the Labyrinth on the Korean Peninsula

In October 2013, as outlined in the report *New North Korea Policy: Beyond Trustpolitik on the Korean Peninsula*, the East Asia Institute emphasized the need for the North to evolve from a self-contradicting current two-track strategic line of simultaneous development of its economy and nuclear weapons program to *pyŏngjin nosŏn* 2.0: the path of non-nuclear weapon security in tandem with economic development. Additionally, a complex strategy toward North Korea encompassing “deterrence-engagement-trust” was suggested to craft a new North Korea policy that effectively prompts such changes in North Korea.⁴

Instead of the two-track line of economic and nuclear weapons program development in 2013, the Kim Jong-un regime cautiously put the “Golden age of *Songun* Korea” as the official regime guideline. However, the nuclear weapons program undeniably still remains within North Korea’s perspective. If the North is to let in “Golden age of *Songun* Korea” in a genuine way, it should not only demonstrate sincerity in denuclearization efforts, but also pave a path for “peaceful economic development and improvement of people’s livelihood.” The North Korean model of a “peaceful development” doctrine is needed.

North Korea’s New Year’s Address should be rewritten. In terms of domestic capability strengthening, economic development should be prioritized in tandem with the *pyŏngjin nosŏn* 2.0 of economic development and non-nuclear-weapon security. North Korea should also establish a denuclearized security system on the military front and reinforce its political ideology that can effectively execute *pyŏngjin nosŏn* 2.0. With respect to inter-Korean relations, the North should suggest a new South Korea policy that is different from a “camouflaged peace offensive” based on the three principles of Korean unification. In international relations, the North also needs to overcome its perception of the North Korea as in a “state of war” against the U.S. as soon as possible and instead show an upgraded international relations perspective of “autonomous coexistence.”

South Korea’s North Korea policy should focus on facilitating the North toward selecting and pursuing the *pyŏngjin nosŏn* 2.0 track. On December 30, 2013, President Park Geun-hye set the priorities for future North Korea policy as follows: to “maintain a strong deterrent capability,” “upgrade the trust-building process,” and “seek denuclearization of the North as a means to pursue joint progress on the Korean Peninsula and across Northeast Asia” in her *Project Syndicate* article entitled “Reinventing the Inter-Korean Relationship.”⁵

In order to escape from and prevent future exacerbation of the instability surrounding the Korean peninsula, it is inevitable that the reinforcement and maintenance of deterrent capability is the South’s No.1 fundamental principle of its North Korea policy. While the North in 2014 will pour all its energy into consolidating the economic front, any significant economic development will be difficult without an improvement in inter-Korean rela-

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tions or sincere efforts toward denuclearization. Therefore, the only option left for North Korea is *pyŏngjin nosŏn* 2.0. However, it would be unrealistic to expect that simple trust-building “upgrading measures” - such as humanitarian assistance to the North and efforts to hold reunions of separated families and resolve the issue of prisoners of war and abductees who have been kept in the North - would prompt Kim Jong-un to shift his strategic policy direction from *pyŏngjin nosŏn* 1.0 to 2.0. The regional architecture of East Asia and the Korean peninsula is necessary for the peace and prosperity of the region in order to guarantee Pyongyang’s survival without turning to nuclear weapons. Strengthening this regional architecture by fully supporting and facilitating a change in the North’s strategic policy direction toward *pyŏngjin nosŏn* 2.0 should become the No. 2 fundamental principle of South Korea’s North Korea policy. South Korea’s No. 3 principle should be to maintain close international cooperation with related countries, such as the U.S. and China, in order to prepare the ground for the regional architecture for peace and prosperity. Lastly, the No. 4 principle is to establish step-by-step trust-building measures that correspond to every phase in order to facilitate the Korean peninsula’s move beyond the current period of crisis to a transition period that can lead to a negotiation and settlement phase. ■

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Endnotes

* This is a translated version of the original commentary in Korean published on January 27, 2014.

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer. 1975 (2012). *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum). 299-306.

² Kim Il-sung. 1964. “Let Us Strengthen Our Capabilities for Revolution in All Fronts to Bring the National Unification.” [*Choguk T’ongirŭi Wiŏbŭl Shirhyŏnhagi Wihayŏ Hyŏngmyŏngnyŏngnyangŭl Paekpangŭro Kanghwahaja*]. Eighth Plenary Session of the Fourth Term of the WPK’s Central Committee. February 27; Kim Il-sung. 1965. “On socialist construction and the South Korean revolution in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.” Lecture at the “Ali Archam” Academy of Social Sciences of Indonesia, April 14.

³ National Defence Commission of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. 2014. “Let’s Pave a Wide Avenue for Improving Inter-Korean Relations by the Concerted Efforts of Koreans by the Idea of By Our Nation Itself.” January 16.

⁴ Ha et al. 2013. “Beyond *Trustpolitik* on the Korean Peninsula.” October 21.

⁵ Park Geun-hye. 2013. “Reinventing the Inter-Korean Relationship.” *Project Syndicate*. December 30.