

The Proposal for Inter-Korean High-Level Military Talks: Background and Outlook

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On January 20th North Korea suddenly announced a proposal for “inter-Korean high-level military talks.” In a message sent to South Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan Jin in the name of North Korean People’s Armed Forces Minister Kim Young Chun, the North proposed “holding high-level military talks between North and South in order to clarify our views on the Cheonan incident and the Yeonpyeong artillery battle and to relieve military tensions on the Korean peninsula.” High-level military talks could mean either general-level talks or defense minister talks. This raises questions, first of all, about what was meant by the North’s somewhat vaguely worded suggestion for “high-level” military talks. Up to now, North Korean proposals for military talks have mostly been general-level or working-level talks. This vague but somewhat significant proposal for high-level talks appears to be an attempt to get the attention of the South Korean government and the international community. It would have been difficult for them to get our attention by merely proposing general-level or working-level talks.

At the same time, North Korea displayed particular shrewdness in the timing of this proposal. At a time when concerns have arisen about its uranium enrichment program (UEP) and the US-China summit released a joint statement mentioning the need for “sincere

and constructive inter-Korean dialogue” in order to break through the current impasse, North Korea has stepped forward with this proposal for talks as a sort of response. I.e., in answer to the US and China’s formal calls for “sincere inter-Korean dialogue,” North Korea has made a show of promoting “sincere” dialogue. They also may have been trying to achieve the effect of forcing the ROK government into a position where they must accept North Korea’s demands for dialogue. Whatever the North’s aims may have been, our government accepted their proposal.

Beginning with the New Year’s joint editorial, North Korea has recently begun assertively pushing for improved inter-Korean relations, proposing various kinds of talks. A representative example of this was the “joint statement by the government, Party and other organizations of the Republic” issued on January 5th calling for “unconditional talks.” The South Korean government made no particular response, discounting the statement as “lacking in sincerity.” Looking at it this way, the North’s “dialogue offensive” strategy seems to have mainly succeeded in forcing the ROK government into a position where it would have to accept calls for dialogue.

In that case, how should we regard this most recent proposal by the North for high-level military talks? Is it just a one-time proposal as part of the dialogue offensive, or a bit of political/military rhetoric stemming from an elaborate policy plan? My conclusion is that the latter is closer to the truth. This is because North Korea is making direct use of military action to seize the initiative in inter-Korean relations. It is as if they are applying the so-called “military-first politics” by using their military to shake up the South and manipulate it into acting according to the North’s wishes.

The North’s behavior in allowing the military to direct its policy toward the South stems from the leadership’s efforts to re-align their internal organization. First, they revised their strategic line against the South with a focus on the military. Major General Kim Young Chol, known as the main North Korean military official dealing with South Korea, was appointed director of the KPA General Reconnaissance Bureau in May 2009. This bureau is a new, expanded operations agency which has combined the KWP’s Operations Department, Office No. 35, and the Reconnaissance Bureau of the People’s Armed Forces Ministry. Previously, the KWP’s Operations Department took charge of basic education and training of operatives, escorting and guiding infiltration operatives, and developing infiltration routes into South Korea and other countries; they also worked on burrowing into South Korea, the US, and Japan to sow chaos during times of emergency. Office No. 35 was in charge of gathering intelligence on South Korea and other countries and also executing terrorism operations in the South and abroad. The Armed Forces Reconnaissance Bureau belonged to the General Staff of the Armed Forces Ministry and was tasked with training and dispatching spies to the South, and also performed abductions, assassinations, strategic operations, and reconnaissance of core strategic facilities.

The formation of the KPA General Reconnaissance Bureau as a new body encompassing these three organizations signifies that the KPA has emerged as the entity in charge of all operations against South Korea. It is likely that future activities against the South will become more coordinated. Up to now operations against the South have been divided among the Party, the military, the KWP Operations Department and Office No. 35, and it may be that problems have arisen due to the negative effects of overlapping duties and competing displays of loyalty. As one way of overcoming this, they have apparently taken measures to consolidate the chain of command for South Korean operations into the form “National Defense Commission → People’s Armed Forces Ministry → General Reconnaissance Bureau.” Thus a single chain of command for South Korean operations has been established connecting the chain of command “NDC Chairman Kim Jong Il → People’s Armed Forces Minister Kim Young Chun → General Reconnaissance Bureau Director Kim Young Chol.” Of course, it is possible that a direct chain of command from “NDC Chairman Kim Jong Il → General Reconnaissance Bureau Director Kim Young Chol” might come into operation as circumstances demand. This means that strong and efficient military-centered operations against the South are being carried out under the direct orders of Kim Jong Il.

The focus of North Korea’s operations against the South seems to have shifted from “political logic” to “military logic.” Considering the logic of North Korea’s *songun* (military-first) political system, this is a quite natural change. The *songun* system pursues diplomacy based on “strength,” i.e. military measures, and they are working to institutionalize this kind of diplomacy (the *songun* era diplomatic strategy) as well as their strategy toward the South. The policy the North has pursued toward the South since the start of the Lee Myung Bak administration, based on a campaign of harsh criticism and various military threats, clearly reflects military-centric logic.

In fact, for the last several years, North Korea has begun each year with displays of hard-and-soft behavior, combining military threats with calls for improved inter-Korean relations. In November 2008 Major General Kim Young Chol was the official who took the lead in threatening businesses operating in the Kaesong Industrial Complex and significantly reducing the number of people and vehicles going in and out of the complex, which demonstrates how the North Korean military has taken charge of actions against the South. The sinking of the Cheonan and the attack on Yeonpyeong appear to be the result of orders sent down in the order “NDC Chairman Kim Jong Il → People’s Armed Forces Minister Kim Young Chun → General Reconnaissance Bureau Director Kim Young Chol.” Ultimately, it has become clear that the North Korean strategy for taking control of inter-Korean relations involves a repeated pattern of military threat offensive → calls for military talks.

It appears that the North Korean leadership has made detailed, step-by-step preparations to make the West Sea area into a core region in which to carry out military provocations. First, they made various incursions to revoke the validity of the NLL, while unilaterally drawing their own military demarcation line in order to justify their actions. North Korea also claims that the attack on Yeonpyeong Island was a defensive action in response to South Korean navy exercises in an area of the West Sea which North Korea argues is their territory. Whenever North Korea feels the need to take the initiative in inter-Korean relations, they may make additional provocations in the West Sea or the 5 West Sea islands. North Korea will likely continue to artificially create armed clashes like the incidents in the West Sea to induce military tensions on the peninsula and force South Korea to accept their demands. In other words, North Korea's plan appears to include a cycle of stronger military threats → calls for inter-Korean military talks → inducing a strong desire for improved inter-Korean relations → pushing to restart inter-Korean dialogue → compelling the South Korean authorities to submit to special demands → achieving their ultimate goal of seizing the initiative from the South.

After the Cheonan sinking, working-level military talks were held at North Korea's suggestion, and now in the wake of the Yeonpyeong attack they have made this latest proposal for high-level military talks. Thus there is ample evidence of the current North Korean strategy towards the South. By proposing military talks to erase the military tensions on the peninsula, they are hoping to escape the isolation they have endured since the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong attacks, while seizing the initiative in restoring inter-Korean relations. Through the format of military talks, they can threaten the South militarily while firing a barrage of criticisms against them as well. This is supported by the fact that most of the discussions between South and North Korean authorities since the start of the current administration have been in the format of working-level military talks.

The ROK government has taken the appropriate step of accepting the latest North Korean proposal for high-level military talks while maintaining the cautious position that North Korea's "sincerity" must be reaffirmed through working-level talks. Several scenarios may play out following the working-level military talks, summarized as follows. First, if the ROK government fails to find signs of sincerity during the working-level talks, the high-level military talks may lose transparency. North Korea will try to press the point that it is the South Korean side which is blocking progress in the military talks, not the North. If the high-level talks fall apart due to a lack of sincerity, they will try to put the blame on the South, arguing that South Korea rejected the demands for dialogue by the US and China. North Korea will say that even though inter-Korean dialogue is necessary to relieve the military tensions on the peninsula, South Korean opposition is making that impossible, and thus US-DPRK military talks are needed. They will then use direct US-DPRK dialogue to legitimize the idea of a peace treaty,

while connecting it to the restarting of the 6 Party Talks. It may be that the North's call for high-level inter-Korean military talks is nothing more than a way to accumulate more excuses to restart the 6 Party Talks.

The second scenario is that the ROK government will agree to high-level military talks and the talks will succeed. In this case as well, the North Korean side will likely work to ensure that things proceed according to their wishes, while taking a stance of denouncing the South Korean government. They will emphasize that they had no involvement in the Cheonan incident and that it was all fabricated by the ROK government. They will also rationalize the Yeonpyeong attack as a defensive measure in response to military provocations by the ROK. They will adhere to their position of demanding practical solutions for preventing clashes in the West Sea and preserving the peace, while working to invalidate the NLL. They may also focus on demands that South Korea abstain from psychological warfare operations, which the South had threatened to restart after the Cheonan attack. The North Korean authorities will argue that the scattering of leaflets and propaganda broadcasts by South Korea is the greatest systemic threat to their regime. Through leaflets and broadcasts, information about the family history and private lives of Kim Jong Il and his successor may become widely known among North Korean civilians and soldiers, which will not only cause serious damage to their authority and prestige but also may sow criticism and dissent against chosen successor Kim Jong Eun. North Korea will make direct efforts to prevent this. The South Korean government will have to take a negative stance in response, causing the military talks to drift along without achieving any solid results.

Third, North Korea may appeal for continued talks on the pretext of the need to discuss military measures to end the animosity in military relations, reduce tensions and secure peace, in which case these military talks may go on longer than expected. At the working-level talks that were re-opened in 2010 for the first time in 2 years, despite the South Korean side's strident campaigning in regard to the Cheonan incident, the North Korean representative maintained a flexible attitude throughout, reflecting North Korea's awareness of the need for inter-Korean dialogue. Through the ongoing military talks North Korea will strive to create a favorable environment for restoring inter-Korean relations. In particular, they will try to connect the military talks with other issues in inter-Korean dialogue, such as restarting tours at Mt. Kumgang, expanding the Kaesong Industrial Complex and restarting tours of Kaesong. However if things do not proceed smoothly, North Korea may raise tensions at any time by committing more localized provocations.