

DECIPHERING NORTH KOREA'S MILITARY ACTIVITIES

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In 2024, the growing tensions on the Korean Peninsula have highlighted the unpredictability of North Korea's military intentions. This issue brief evaluates the strategic behaviors of North Korea, particularly under the leadership of Kim Jong Un. By analyzing public military activities, often portrayed as a “show of force,” it attempts to interpret the underlying political and strategic intentions that North Korea aims to convey both domestically and internationally. The analysis suggests that these displays serve multiple functions, including deterrence, coercion, and internal governance. This issue brief contributes to a more nuanced understanding of North Korea's military posturing and proposes considerations for a rational strategy in the ROK-U.S. alliance's approach towards the regime.

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With the start of 2024, the predictions by Robert Carlin and Siegfried Hecker that North Korea is more likely than ever to attempt war have resonated significantly within South Korea.¹ Assessing the possibility of war on the Korean Peninsula always indicates a high possibility except on rare historical occasions. The assessment of Kim Jong Un's likelihood to attempt war varies among observers.

However, we have always failed to accurately understand our adversaries' intentions. There is no consensus on whether the purpose of North Korea's nuclear development is for attack, coercion, or deterrence. Kim Jong Un's rationality seems to differ from ours. We have tried to

avoid the “mirror image” trap, but it still plagues us.

Ultimately, to know the real intentions of North Korea, we must figure out the meaning in the messages they directly send. Especially during Kim Jong Un's era, North Korea's “show of force” has been used as a channel to convey various messages both domestically and internationally. While it is impossible to analyze all military activities, by analyzing the public activities of Kim Jong Un, North Korea's supreme leader, we can typify and interpret the political, strategic intentions they want to convey, and contribute to establishing a rational strategy toward North Korea by the ROK-U.S. alliance.

What can we know about North Korea? Through 'Show of Force' as public military activities

Historically, we know that totalitarian states have actively used military power in governing the state. Hitler's *Nation-alsozialismus* prioritized enhancing military effectiveness in a "permanent emergency" through mass organization. Stalin's military played a role in social control in rebuilding a military superpower post-war. Mao Zedong's People's Liberation Army showed a successful case of converting a civil war victory into domestic control.

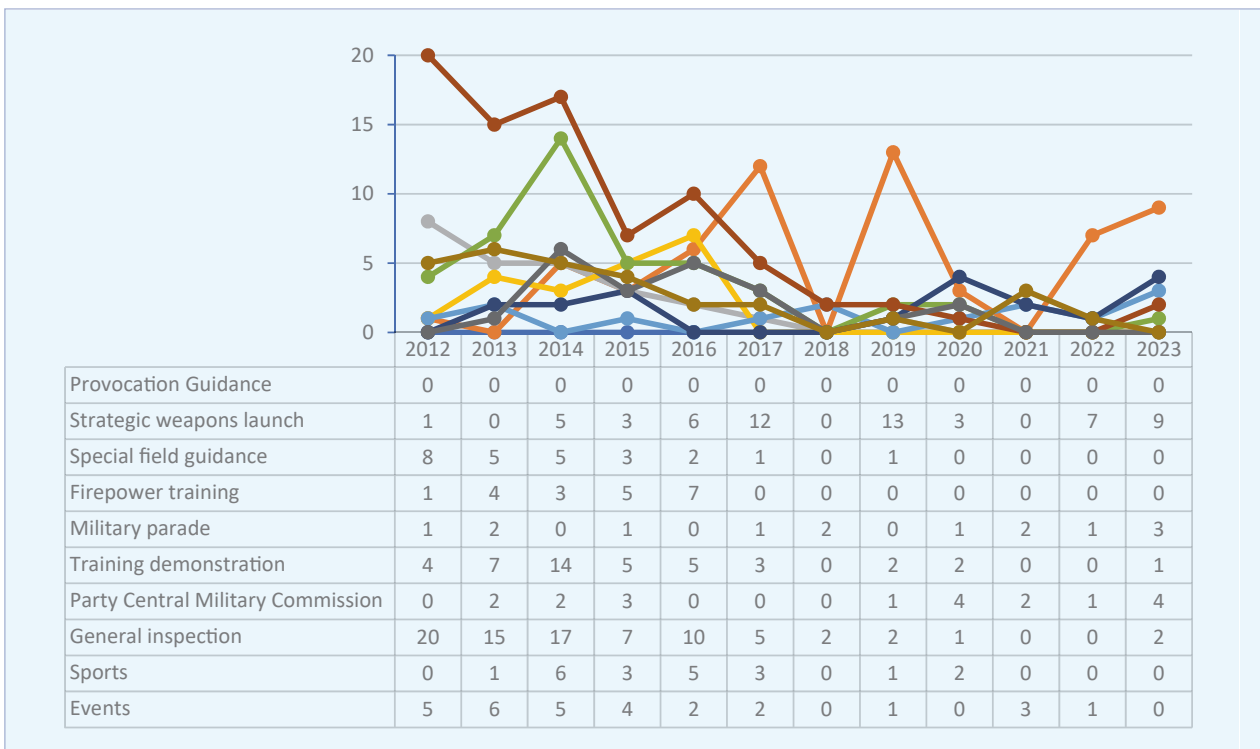
The Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) has a database of "Kim Jong Un's public activities" from 2012 to the present.² This database organized comprehensively activities reported by Rodong Sinmun and Korean Central News Agency into 8 areas and 116 types. Another study analyzed 489 military-related public activities from 2012 to 2020, presenting more detailed classification criteria by dividing them into military reinforcement and management activities.³

Classifying North Korea's military activities by type is important, but it is necessary to analyze them more finely.

Based on what message they intend to send by type and the intensity of influence, they can be typified into three categories. Of course, the 10 types do not match exactly with each tier, and this should be judged case by case.

Level	Type	Mechanism	Intensity
Tier-1	1) Provocation guidance 2) Strategic weapons launch/demonstration provocation	Provocation	High
Tier-2	3) Special field guidance (inspection, training, meeting) 4) Firepower training/guidance (conventional) 5) Military parade 6) Training (maneuver, general) demonstration	Demonstration	Moderate
Tier-3	7) Party Central Military Commission 8) General inspection 9) Sports 10) Events (meetings, competitions) display	Display	Low

Analyzing 296 cases classified as "show of force" from 2012 to 2023,⁴ military-related public activities accounted for more than 20 percent of Kim Jong Un's total 1,426 public activities. Especially, there were a total



of 235 instances from 2012 to 2017, and it has not recovered to the previous level since then. Among a total of 296 cases, Tier-1 accounted for a significant portion of 59 cases, continuously increasing from 2014 to 2017, showing a lull only in 2018, and then explosively increasing from 2019 onwards. Tier-2 simultaneously sends domestic and foreign messages, with firepower training almost not conducted since 2017, and the 14 military parades held in various formats and contents require separate analysis.⁵ Tier-3 were actively carried out until 2016 but have significantly decreased since then, maybe due to COVID-19.

What do they want to show? ‘Military governance’ through show of force

A “show of force” has been generally considered taboo. Showing military capability to the opponent could secure a favorable position in negotiations but could also expose vulnerabilities that could be exploited on the actual battlefield.⁶ Robert Work, a former U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, said, “We reveal our military power for deterrence and conceal it for advantages on the battlefield.”⁷

North Korea, fortunately or not, is transmitting too many messages. Not all North Korean military activities are “show of force,” but it remains the most appropriate term as it still serves as a means of intentional and strategic propaganda. In totalitarian states like North Korea, the military plays an important role in propagandizing and organizing the masses into a single ideology. Therefore, North Korea’s public military activities inherently carry important political, strategic messages, and efforts to understand them have been ongoing.

So, what does Kim Jong Un intend to show through a show of force? Through various types of military field guidance activities, Kim Jong Un has used a show of force not only in the military dimension but also to flaunt his leadership politically and strategically. Domestically, he has consolidated military and public morale, and externally, he has demonstrated deterrence and defense against external threats while seeking to change the *status quo*. Thus, Kim Jong Un’s military governance is evaluated as different from Kim Jong Il’s in terms of institutionalization, speed, ruthlessness, symbolization, boldness, image politics, and communicativeness.⁸

What has Kim Jong Un been saying through military activities?

Category	1st Phase (2012-2017)		2nd Phase (2018-2020)		3rd Phase (2021-present)
Security Strategy	Power Stabilization and Confrontational Adventurism		Denuclearization Negotiations and Internal Management		Regime Consolidation to Break through Internal and External Challenges
Period	2012-2015	2016-2017	2018-2019	2019-2020	Regime Consolidation and National Defense
	Stabilization of power,	Hardline Foreign Policy	Denuclearization Negotiation	Frontal Breakthrough	
Strategic Line	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nuclear-Economic Parallel Development (2013) - Completion of Nuclear Force (2017) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Full Effort in Socialist Economic Construction (2018) - Frontal Breakthrough Strategy (2020) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-Reliance and Strengthening National Defense (2021)
Security Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 7th Party Congress (2016) - Intensification of Sanctions Against North Korea (2017) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Denuclearization Negotiations (2018) - Hanoi NK-US Summit (2019) - COVID-19 (2020) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 8th Party Congress (2021) - Ukraine War (2022)
Show of Force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Power Stabilization - Enhancing Negotiating Power 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internal Unity and Social Stability - Strengthening of National Defense Power 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social Integration - Revising the Status Quo

Phase 1: Power Stabilization and Confrontational Adventurism (2012-2017)

When Kim Jong Il died in 2011, Kim Jong Un was in his mid-20s and unprepared for leadership. He had a weak power base, and the country's stature was severely weakened. Therefore, this period focused on establishing the legitimacy of hereditary power, overcoming the image of a "young and inexperienced leader," showcasing domestic governance power, and securing sole ruling power. Therefore, the first half focused on personal and domestic levels of military governance and a show of force, gradually transitioning to sending messages of coercion to the outside.

First, in the power stabilization phase (2012-2015), Kim Jong Un weakened the influence and power of the military, which had become excessively bloated due to Kim Jong Il's "military-first (*Songun*)" politics. On the other hand, he endeavored to build an image of a bold and daring military leader for power stabilization. For this goal, the direction of the show of force included military field guidance not bowing to crises and dangers (visiting military bases in frontline and urban areas), showcasing military traditions of anti-Japanese guerrillas (veterans' meetings), oath-taking ceremonies, events for military generals' discipline, frequent visits to areas around Pyongyang as 'showcase' public activities. By claiming the legitimacy of hereditary power, he aimed to establish his stature and prestige as a stable national leader by portraying himself as a "bold and courageous" military leader.

Second, after the "parallel development of the economy and nuclear arms (*Byungjin*)" line (2016-2017), he took on the international community, including the U.S., while striving to enhance the capabilities of nuclear delivery means, showing an extreme confrontational and adventurous behavior different from Kim Jong Il's calculated adventurism. The direction for achieving these effects through a show of force included massive new weapon displays and mass events such as military parades for regime consolidation, observation of strategic weapon tests, strong statements against the international community, hosting military conferences to show strong leadership and propaganda. In 2016 alone, two

nuclear tests were conducted, and strategic weapon demonstrations were led, and in 2017, unprecedented high-intensity military activities, including nuclear tests, were conducted. Despite this, domestically, a more relaxed and 'smiling' image was portrayed through broadcasts and photos, starting to create a victorious and stable image.

Phase 2: Denuclearization Negotiations and Search for a New Strategy (2018-2020)

The period from 2018 to 2020 is divided into the search for denuclearization negotiations and a breakthrough strategy, characterized by the need for internal management in the negotiation phase and the need to send external coercion messages in the negotiation deadlock phase. This period is divided into two phases: 2018, when there was a need to send conciliatory messages from Kim Jong Un for denuclearization negotiations and improvement of North-South relations, and 2019-2020, when a new path was declared after the no-deal in Hanoi in February 2019 and the frontal breakthrough was pursued.

First, during 2018, Kim Jong Un needed to conduct essential military-related public activities for internal consolidation while minimizing military activities to create an atmosphere conducive to denuclearization negotiations. From 2018 to February 2019, Kim Jong Un conducted a few military activities focused on internal management while carefully ensuring that external coercion messages were not unnecessarily released. Thus, among a total of 112 public activities in 2018, military-related public activities were only 4, significantly reduced from 27 the previous year. Although external hardline messages were restrained, military parades were held exceptionally twice, comforting the public and military morale, and sending messages to facilitate smooth negotiations by showcasing the 'stability' of the regime externally.

Next, after the failure of negotiations and the deadlock in negotiations in 2019, Kim Jong Un presented a 'new path,' requiring the need to simultaneously send messages of leadership reconstruction, internal consolidation, and external coercion signals. Military-

related public activities gradually recovered to 21 and 13 in 2019 and 2020, respectively, and the proportion of military-related activities increased back to the level of Kim Jong Un's early phase. In 2019, 13 strategic weapon demonstrations were conducted through Tier 1 high-intensity military provocations. Subsequently, at the 7th Expanded Meeting of the Party Central Military Commission on December 22, a 'self-defensive national defense strengthening line' was selected, and a 'frontal breakthrough' was declared at the subsequent Party Plenary Meeting. On November 25, Kim Jong Un designated a target at the 2nd Artillery Battalion of the Ongjin Peninsula Coastal Artillery and 'ordered firing,' clearly sending a message to South Korea by directly violating the 'North-South Military Agreement' concluded in 2018.

Phase 3: Regime Consolidation and Overcoming Internal and External Challenges (2021-Present)

Facing challenging security environment factors such as the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic leading to border closures and continued economic deterioration, difficulties in finding an exit for denuclearization negotiations, exploration of the Biden administration's North Korea policy (2021), and exploration of the new South Korean government's North Korea policy (2022), the strategic line of 'self-reliance' and 'nuclear-centered national defense strengthening' at the 8th Party Congress on January 8, 2021, became a key driver of military governance. And, as the U.S.-China strategic competition is becoming 'structuralized' into a fierce confrontation system reminiscent of the Cold War, North Korea is seeking to secure strategic space in this trend.

In 2021, despite no progress in denuclearization negotiations, North Korea took a strategic approach in response to the newly inaugurated Biden administration in the United States. Rather than excessively provoking the U.S., North Korea focused on enhancing its short-range missile capabilities under the threshold, sending a clear message of not wanting to further exacerbate the already difficult living conditions due to the prolonged "triple hardships." Kim Jong Un prioritized consolidating internal unity and soothing the public

sentiment by avoiding strategic weapon test sites in favor of showcasing internal management activities. These activities contrasted with the powerful rhetoric of the 8th Party Congress.

In 2022, from the beginning of the year, Kim Jong Un broke the nuclear and ICBM test moratorium he had promised in 2018, declaring openly that North Korea could conduct nuclear tests and launch additional ICBM tests at any time. Rejecting dialogue offers from the United States and South Korea, North Korea launched a record number of 65 missiles, including 8 ICBMs, and accelerated its efforts on the "top five strategic weapons tasks," including hypersonic missiles. Although the number of military activities was not high, Kim Jong Un directly encouraged the development and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons, drawing significant attention.

In 2023, military activities significantly increased. Notably, Kim Jong Un's field guidance proportion increased significantly. Introducing new strategic weapons such as 'tactical nuclear' warheads, solid-fuel ICBMs, the first operational ballistic missile submarine (SSB), and military reconnaissance satellites, North Korea created the appearance of imminent deployment of nuclear forces. It propagandized as if it had completed a practical nuclear posture with targeting. Especially in August, the Party Central Military Commission was convened to discuss "major issues to fully prepare for war," and Kim Jong Un also signed an order.

What should we focus on in observing North Korea in the future?

On January 15, 2024, in the Supreme People's Assembly's policy speech, Kim Jong Un announced that he would put an end to the nearly 80-year inter-Korean relationship and newly legalize the policy towards the South. Inter-Korean relations will no longer be regarded as a relationship between compatriots but as belligerent countries at war, specifying the Republic of Korea as an "immutable principal enemy" in the constitution, and declaring to eliminate the concepts of unification, reconciliation, and compatriots.⁹ Karlin and Hecker's claims have been strongly supported by North Korea.

However, it is still difficult to see Kim Jong Un's claim that "preparations for a major change to conquer the entire territory of South Korea" will be realized through war.

This issue brief must inevitably conclude with more certain and safe recommendations. In the current uncertain and unpredictable situation on the Korean Peninsula, we need adaptive, flexible, and resilient response measures. There is no silver bullet to subdue North Korea in the short term. However, one thing is clear: North Korea's military governance will inevitably increase the regime's vulnerability in the long run. As internal and external contradictions deepen, North Korea will actively utilize show of force with increased intensity, which is both the best information for understanding North Korea's situation and a card we can use. Therefore, understanding North Korea's military show of force is a decisive task for us.

First, it is necessary to keep reading the changes within the North Korean regime caused by the show of force. Military governance, which forcibly covers regime contradictions through a show of force, will deepen its vulnerability and contradictions considering the cost and counter-effects of the show of force. Military parades, strategic weapon tests, etc., incur significant costs, so attention should be paid to the cost of military show of force, changes in the North Korean economy and social system, and increased dependence on external forces such as China and Russia.

Second, conversely, we should also pay attention to changes in the messages of military show of force due to internal changes in North Korea. Given the extremely limited internal information in North Korea, the overt military displays provide important information for understanding the internal situation. Not only meetings and military parade speeches that directly send messages but also accurately analyzing trends in field guidance, military exercise and training, strategic weapon provocations, and general visits can, inversely, provide an accurate assessment of the North Korea's internal situation.

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Endnotes

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