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North Korea's Continuous Military Provocations: Causes and Prospects

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Pyongyang has rapidly escalated its military provocations this year. While North Korea's military offensives have been a part of its routine reaction to incoming South Korean administrations, firing dozens of missiles in response to ROK-U.S. joint military exercises or launching a missile across the NLL are unprecedented provocations. This paper examines the driving factors behind North Korea's recent aggressive shift.

During the 8th Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), Pyongyang underscored its will to enhance its national defense capabilities. North Korea's foreign policy stance following the 8th Party Congress has displayed two main features: First, by continuing to develop strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, North Korea aims to increase the cost of conflict for South Korea and the U.S. Second, by demonstrating its resilience to withstand international sanctions, North Korea strives to undermine the U.S.-claimed efficacy of economic sanctions.

North Korea's view of the international situation forms the base of its foreign strategy. Kim Jong Un defined the current geopolitical order as a "New Cold War" and "multipolar system" in his 2021 and 2022 administrative speeches. Kim's calculation is that strengthened ties with China and Russia will help North Korea withstand economic sanctions and pressures from the U.S. and global society. Kim Jong Un also believes the current global situation provides North Korea with the legitimacy and opportunity to enhance its military forces. In other words, Kim expects the polarized global structure, with the ROK-U.S.-Japan and DPRK-China-Russia alliances in confrontation, to create a favorable environment for North Korea. Thus, Pyongyang's escalation of military tensions is more likely an attempt to exacerbate the conflict structure rather than a gesture for dialogue.

North Korea's recent military provocations are also based on its confidence in possessing nuclear weapons. North Korea perceives itself as a so-called "strategic state" that can employ nuclear arsenals. Pyongyang predicts military superiority over Seoul even in the case where a local dispute may escalate into war, and thus continues to actively conduct military offensives. Pyongyang will likely maintain its foreign strategy for some time as it expects the current international situation to persist for a prolonged period.

South Korea's short-term response to the threat posed by North Korea can only resort to a strengthened ROK-U.S. alliance with military preparations. However, the South Korean government should also simultaneously carry out a mid-to-long-term foreign strategy to overcome the challenges of North Korea by managing ROK-China and ROK-Russia relations.

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Nuclear Weapons, ROK-U.S. Alliance, Foreign Strategy