

Kim says he has no desire for talks and repeats a threat to destroy South if provoked

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Online Desk: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un restated he has no desire for diplomacy with South Korea and that the North would annihilate its rival if provoked, state media said Friday, in the latest of his belligerent statements that are raising tensions in the region.

During a visit to North Korea's Defense Ministry on Thursday, Kim said his recent moves to cut ties with South Korea allow his military to take on a more aggressive posture "by securing lawfulness to strike and destroy (the South) whenever triggered."

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have increased in recent months, with Kim elevating his weapons demonstrations and threats and the United States, South Korea and Japan strengthening their combined military exercises in response.

While most South Korean officials and experts have downplayed the possibility that Kim has real intent to engage in a war, concerns about a direct military provocation have grown as the North may try to ramp up pressure in an election year in South Korea and the United States.

The North's official Korean Central News Agency reported Kim said he took the initiative to "shake off the unrealistic pretense of dialogue and cooperation with the (South) Korean puppets who sought the collapse of our republic." The agency said Kim on his visit to the ministry was accompanied by his daughter, thought to be named Kim Ju Ae, who some experts believe is being groomed as a future leader.

Kim Jong Un's remarks came weeks after he declared to his rubber-stamp parliament that North Korea was abandoning its long-standing objective of a peaceful unification with South Korea and ordered the rewriting of its constitution to cement the South as its most hostile foreign adversary.

The North has since shut down government departments that handled affairs with the South, tore down a major unification monument and abolished laws that had governed past economic projects with the South.

Experts say Kim's attempts to recalibrate relations with the South, which come amid a testing spree of potentially nuclear-capable weapons targeting neighboring rivals and the United States, are aimed at reducing Seoul's voice and eventually forcing direct negotiations with Washington over the nuclear standoff. His long-term goal is to force the United States to accept the idea of the North as a nuclear power and negotiate security and economic concessions from a position of strength.

Other analysts say Kim may want to raise tensions with South Korea to maintain a sense of external threat for his domestic audience. Kim's government has recently been strengthening campaigns to remove the influence of South Korean pop culture and language amongst his population, which he may see as beneficial to reinforcing the North's national identity and prolonging his family's dynastic rule.

In a pre-recorded interview with local television that aired Monday, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol described Kim's government as "irrational" actors who are putting further strain on North Korea's broken economy by aggressively expanding the country's collection of nuclear weapons and missiles.

"We need to keep that in mind as we prepare to counter their security threats or provocations, preparing not just for actions based on rational judgments but also actions based on irrational conclusions," Yoon said.