



North Korea's H1 2024 in Review: Trends and Future Policy Outlook

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This article analyzes trends in North Korea (DPRK) during the first half of 2024 by referencing reports from North Korean media on the results of the 10th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee (June 28 - July 1, 2024). The analysis is divided into domestic and foreign policies.

North Korea's domestic policy under Kim Jong Un has consistently focused on strengthening of state control over the economy and the populace, centered around the party-state system. This trend has continued into the first half of 2024, as reflected in the agenda items discussed during the 10th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee.

Unusual trends also emerged in the first half of 2024. Firstly, Kim Jong Un has established an independent identity from Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. This trend is evident in the emergence of "Kim Jong Un-ism," the downgrading of Kim Il Sung's birthday from the "Day of the Sun" to simply "4·15 (April 15th)," the placement of portraits of Marx-Lenin and Kim Jong Un side by side, and particularly in the recent plenary meeting where participants wore badges with only Kim Jong Un's image.

Furthermore, there were two notable trends in North Korea's economic policy this year. First, the "great plan for regional development" was established as the core of civilian economic policy (MFA 2024). Second, the development of the military-industrial sector was emphasized. These core economic policies were outlined in the policy speech at the 10th session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly on January 15, 2024. Interestingly, the "great regional development" was not mentioned in the domestic economic policy agendas at the 9th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee, held just fifteen days earlier. Instead, the key agenda at the 9th Plenary Meeting was to "further accelerate the radical development of national defense capabilities" (KCNA 12/31/2023).

Based on reports from North Korea's official media and the results of the 10th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee, the North Korean authorities are focusing exclusively on "regional development." To ensure the implementation of this policy, North Korea assigned the project to the Organization and Guidance Department and held the 19th Enlarged Meeting of the Political Bureau of the 8th Central Committee from January 23 to 24. During this meeting, Kim Jong Un instructed

the mobilization of “units of the People’s Army ... on bringing about a regional industrial revolution” (*KCNA* 1/15/2024).

On the other hand, specific trends regarding the development of the military-industrial sector are hardly mentioned in North Korean media. Inferences can be made from reports of Kim Jong Un’s on-site inspections. During the first half of 2024, Kim Jong Un visited military factories six times, including a visit immediately following the 10th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee on July 2. In his policy speech at the 10th session of the 14th Supreme People’s Assembly in January 2024, Kim Jong Un stated, “(A)ll institutions, enterprises, organizations, and citizens ... should have a correct view of military affairs and ... provide everything needed for strengthening the military capability on the top-priority basis and in the highest quality” (*Rodong Sinmun* 1/16/2024). This principle resembles the previous “military-first (*Songun*)” economic policy and may contradict the seemingly top priority development of the ‘regional industries.’

Next, an examination of trends in the first half of 2024 regarding North Korea’s external security is necessary. A report on the 10th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee addresses external security issues with a single brief sentence, stating that Kim Jong Un “clarified the orientation of the military and political activities of all the armed forces of the DPRK, including the KPA” (MFA 2024). This is unusual because, given the external security trends in the first half of 2024, North Korea would likely have had sufficient material for self-praise and boasting remarks.

Here are three related points to mention. First, at the end of 2023 and early 2024, North Korea redefined its relationship with South Korea as “two belligerent states ... most hostile toward each other” (*KCNA* 12/31/2023). Expectations were high for the 10th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee to address this and take additional measures. Second, in the first half of 2024, Kim Jong Un’s primary focus was on military matters. Out of his 53 public activities, 27 were related to enhancing military capabilities and production. Moreover, North Korea supplied significant quantities of conventional weapons, including shells and missiles, to Russia. Third, the visit of Putin to Pyongyang on June 19 and the signing of the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership significantly bolstered North Korea’s external security position.

Moving forward, this article will examine North Korea’s external trends in the first half of 2024 and provide an outlook for the second half. First, North Korea’s aggressive rhetoric at the end of 2023, redefining relations with South Korea as “the most hostile,” heightened security concerns for the United States and South Korea (*KCNA* 12/31/2023). Some experts in South Korea expected extra convention provocations this year. Discussions even arose in both countries about whether North Korea had made up its mind for war. However, apart from the June incident involving trash-filled balloons, inter-Korean relations were generally calm.

Based on this background, two inferences can be drawn. First, the first half of the year may have been a period for North Korea to elaborate its new stance towards South Korea. Following the newly asserted rhetoric of “two belligerent states” at war, North Korea might have needed time to reset its strategy, restructure its organizations, assign new tasks to each entity, and prepare accordingly.

Second, ahead of Putin’s visit in June, North Korea might have strategically chosen to avoid further provocations toward the United States and South Korea to prevent escalating tensions on the

Korean Peninsula. As a result, North Korea may have refrained from further provoking the U.S. and South Korea during the first half of the year.

Looking ahead to the second half of the year, North Korea's aggressive tendencies towards the South could intensify. Having completed their realignment of policy regarding the South, various DPRK agencies involved in South Korean affairs may seek to assert their presence through actions. Additionally, North Korea's strengthened relationship with Russia could bolster its capabilities and embolden its stance.

Of course, North Korea also faces a complex set of uncertainties, constraints, and opportunities. Firstly, the solidarity and preparedness of the U.S., South Korea, and Japan partnership have significantly strengthened. Secondly, China remains concerned and would take measures to interdict that North Korea's increased hostility and enhanced cooperation with Russia could jeopardize its own security interests. Third, the factors influencing the Russian calculation on how much to assist North Korea military-technically would be outside of North Korea's control. Fourth, North Korea is also bracing for the result of the American presidential election this year.

One reason why Kim Jong Un mentioned only one sentence on security policy in his policy address to the 10th Plenary Meeting of the 14th SPA may have been that North Korea had not yet firmly decided on its strategy for the second half of the year. Past experience suggests insights into North Korea's future policy, as it has regularly resorted to crisis diplomacy to reorganize its security environment to its advantage. For now, North Korea would want to destroy the loose coalition between South Korea-U.S.-Japan and China to shift the power balance decidedly on the Korean Peninsula in its favor. From North Korea's perspective, without bold and risk-taking interventions, the deadlock in Northeast Asia will likely persist, gradually diminishing its own chance of survival. North Korea might believe that a favorable strategic situation could emerge if it successfully divided the opposing bloc by initiating crises. Based on this strategic calculation, North Korea is likely to continue its seemingly reckless, hardline policies for some time, aiming to foster divisions within the rival bloc regarding its North Korea policies. From its viewpoint, the weakest link may be the political polarization within South Korea. ■

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