



## **The 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK): The Next Five Years of North Korea and a History of Stagnant Growth**

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*Translated by Jinkyung Baek and Hansol Lee*

This week, North Korea held the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), which provides vital insight into what to expect from the regime over the next five years until the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress. Over the course of nine hours, Kim Jong Un reviewed the main domestic and international challenges that have prevented North Korea from progressing in the past five years since the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress, and laid out the North's projects and strategies for overall innovation of the current Party and national tasks to ensure the next step of the victory of North Korean socialism. However, the limitations of Kim Jong Un's report were clear as he looked into the future through the eyes of the past, following the basic framework and language of the revolutionary line that has maintained its influence in the regime since it emerged in the mid-1960s and replaced the war line. Kim Jong Un's report mainly dealt with four things: First, a review of the Party's work since the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress, second, the advancement toward building domestic socialist power, third, the progress of independent reunification and external relations, and fourth, the strengthening of the Party programs.

The 8<sup>th</sup> WPK Congress report began by summarizing the difficulties and achievements of North Korea's political, economic, military, and diplomatic positions over the past five years. The "People-First" Principle was emphasized as the core of Yeongdo ideology. Kim Jong Un then stated that "although the strategic goals in economic construction were not reached," a valuable foundation for sustainable economic development had been laid. The report gave a detailed review of the military's achievements in strengthening North Korea's nuclear war deterrence and self-defense capabilities, and particularly emphasized the effort to modernize nuclear weapons. This section of the report concluded by saying, "North Korea has emerged as a strong nuclear and

military power in the world, and the era of trying to bargain for our own interests with superpowers has ended.” This clearly shows how difficult it will be for North Korea to accept complete denuclearization, contrary to our hopeful expectations. Kim Jong Un assessed the country’s recent diplomacy efforts as “a series of the worst of the worst unprecedented crises in the external environment due to the desperate attacks of the United States and the pressures of the economic sanctions implemented by its followers.” The Central Committee of the Party added to this by stating, “With a bold path change and aggressive strategy, North Korea has contributed to the creation of an atmosphere for peace and dialogue in which international society can sympathize with us, as well as the organization of active external activities to raise our international status.” That is, the report assesses DPRK-China, DPRK-Russia, and DPRK-US relations from the perspective of strengthening international revolutionary capabilities within the Three Fronts strategy.

The next section of the report reviewed the tasks ahead to achieve the next leap in the construction of North Korean socialism, covering the fields of the economy, defense, science technology, and culture in that order. It began with an examination of the economic difficulties of the past five years before discussing the new five-year economic plan starting in 2021. Specifically, Kim Jong Un highlighted “the worst-ever sanction policies of the United States and other hostile forces,” “severe natural disasters,” and “the prolonged global health crisis” as external challenges, while recognizing the weakness of the previous five-year economic development plan, the old system, and old methods of business as internal problems. The report highlighted the aim of the new five-year economic development plan to achieve sustainable economic growth free from external influences, and to significantly improve the quality of life for the people by reorganizing the economic business system and restoring the foundations of self-reliance. However, the report failed to suggest any appropriate solutions, as international economic sanctions, global health crises, and natural disasters cannot be overcome by self-reliance and will persist throughout the next five-year economic development plan period as well.

The next part of the report emphasized the strengthening of national defense. Kim Jong Un referenced the miniaturization of nuclear weapons, the development of tactical and strategic nuclear weapons, the possession of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) and nuclear submarines as a delivery system, and the research and development of advanced weapons and military satellites, stating “As long as imperialism remains on Earth and the threat of war by hostile forces against our country continues, the historical mission of our revolutionary armed forces will never change, and our national defense must be constantly strengthened along the path of new development.” He indicated that the strengthening of national defense will continue until the military build-up of the

US and other hostile forces ceases and the threats and blackmail against North Korea come to an end. However, the continued strengthening of the regime's national defense will end up increasing the defenses of its counterparts, paradoxically leading to the weakening of regime security over time. Similarly, excessive efforts to strengthen military power, including nuclear capabilities, will only prolong international economic sanctions and increase inefficient investment, resulting in a weakening of North Korea's overall domestic capabilities.

Kim Jong Un stressed that it will be possible for North Korea to demonstrate the superiority and the power of North Korean socialism despite the current difficult circumstances. He predicated this on the condition that the country succeeds in reinforcing the core economy and military power, promoting science and technology to construct socialism, and creating a Joseon-style civilization as a new enlightenment of socialist culture while developing corresponding national and social systems.

The report next moves on to discuss independent reunification and the development of North Korea's external relations. Although Kim stated that "The two Koreas are now standing at a critical juncture. They must choose whether to take the path of peace and reunification by resolving the serious deadlock in North-South relations, or whether continue to suffer division amid the vicious circle of confrontation and the danger of war," he also took a principled stand in saying, "In North-South relations, it is critical to be willing to solve the essential problems first. We must stop hostile actions toward each other, and be sincere in how we handle the North-South Declaration." Kim declared that a new path for inter-Korean relations based on trust and reconciliation will open up if South Korea stops focusing on cooperation on peripheral problems such as COVID-19 prevention, humanitarian issues, and tourism, and instead starts to work on the essential problems of peace on the Korean Peninsula, such as suspending the import of advanced military equipment and the joint ROK-US military exercises.

These arguments clearly show how North Korea remains limited owing to self-contradiction. The regime claims that it has no choice but to strengthen its defense capabilities as long as hostile forces continue to pose a threat. However, South Korea and the United States feel that there is no alternative but to strengthen their defense capabilities as long as North Korea poses a nuclear threat. Several basic principles taken from the historical lessons of international politics should be followed in order to resolve this dilemma. First, the issues that North Korea considered peripheral or non-essential are in fact a very important first step toward solving the essential problem of the current stage wherein the two Koreas even distrust "building trust to build trust." The essential issues of peace on Korean Peninsula must be achieved by true consensus on the

complete denuclearization of North Korea and a guarantee for North Korea's regime security. A minimum level of mutual deterrence system should be maintained in order to break this vicious cycle in the process of seeking new inter-Korean relations, and there must be mutual efforts to engage in economic cooperation and preparation for future-oriented survival strategies.

In the regime's discussion of the development of external relations, Kim Jong Un delineated his strategy of "consistently confronting hostile forces and superpowers as a powerful Party," and then explained some key principles. First, North Korea will firmly adhere to the principle of self-reliance in order to protect its national interest. Second, it will offensively pursue diplomatic war in order to keep its right to sovereignty and development. Third, the regime will focus its external political activities to suppress the United States, which is the biggest obstacle to revolution and North Korea's biggest enemy. Fourth, no matter who is in office in the United States, US policy towards North Korea will not change. Therefore, North Korea will establish a shrewd strategy toward the United States and continue to expand its self-reliant capabilities and anti-imperialist alliance.

Policy toward the United States, which lies at the core of North Korea's diplomacy, will have a decisive impact on North Korea in the next five years. President-elect Joe Biden has signaled that he will take a more cautious approach, criticizing President Trump's policy toward North Korea. It is expected that Biden will place somewhat of an emphasis on bottom-up diplomacy unlike Trump's unilateral top-down diplomacy that resembled a TV show, with splashy events like the US-DPRK Summit. Biden, who emphasizes American leadership in sharp contrast to Trump's America First policy, will place value on multilateral negotiation tactics with the relevant states, like the Six-Party Talks, to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue.

The United States will first begin with a nuclear freeze negotiation, even though the ultimate goal is complete denuclearization. Although a nuclear freeze can be regarded as an intermediate stepping stone, the US will not negotiate a nuclear freeze if it lacks trust in the ability to eventually achieve the final goal of complete denuclearization. That is, the United States will proceed to nuclear freeze negotiations only after receiving a comprehensive report of all nuclear facilities and nuclear capabilities to guarantee that North Korea has truly made a strategic decision to pursue complete denuclearization. As seen at the US-DPRK Hanoi Summit, Kim Jong Un's regime is open to negotiations for partial denuclearization. However, North Korea has never made the strategic decision to give up its ability to hold the minimum nuclear weapons required to secure the regime, and will not give up its nuclear weapons easily in the future either. The United States seems willing to accept comprehensive reporting and verification as a first step towards complete

denuclearization. Negotiations over the North Korean demand to lift economic sanctions and guarantee regime security and the US request for a nuclear freeze and complete reporting and verification will inevitably be fierce.

The Biden administration, which emphasizes democracy, holds the view that North Korea needs to choose denuclearization as a measure of self-preservation. Since information on the rapidly changing world is key to North Korea coming around to the viewpoint that denuclearization is a means of self-preservation, free communication of information in North Korea will no doubt be raised as a crucial issue.

If North Korea responds to the Biden administration's North Korea policy in line with the basic principles it has laid out for its external policies going forward, it will realistically be impossible to resume negotiations on lifting economic sanctions and guaranteeing regime security, both of which North Korea desperately needs. North Korea is expected to face the triple disaster of economic sanctions, a health crisis, and natural disasters in the next five years. It must devise a forward-looking survival and developmental strategy that is appropriate for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, going beyond its past view of strengthening the three revolutionary capabilities. The Asia-Pacific, where the Korean Peninsula is located, is entering a period of change in the political order under the dual influence of the global COVID-19 pandemic and strategic competition between the US and China. In order to go beyond 19<sup>th</sup> century self-reliance and achieve 21<sup>st</sup> century coexistence, North Korea should also emerge as a rising power in the new Asia-Pacific order by developing a new blueprint that includes a commitment to denuclearization in the name of self-preservation and coevolution with nearby states. ■

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