



## Analysis on North Korea's 8th Korean Worker's Party Congress: Pyongyang's Agony Hidden in the Feast of Words

2021-03(S)

Cha Du Hyeogn

Principal Fellow  
2021.03.17

The 8th Congress of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP), held from 5 to 12 January, was an opportunity to gauge the direction of North Korea's future internal and external policies. While the North Korean state's newspaper, Rodong Sinmun, stated that the convocation of the Congress is an “expression of [the Party's] firm self-confidence to lead the socialist cause to a next-stage victory,” most of the achievements mentioned in Kim Jong Un's report were abstract, rather than actual. It was also confirmed, once again, that the “Five-Year Plan for National Economic Development,” which Pyongyang pursued as a focal project, had actually failed. Indeed, despite many internal difficulties, no clear and specific vision or measure to overcome them was presented. The increase in its nuclear and conventional forces was one of the few achievements that could be showed off, and the regime declared that it would not give up the “Parallel Development of the Economy and Nuclear Forces” (Byungjin Policy) centered on nuclear weapons. While Pyongyang had announced the “head-on breakthrough battle” policy against internal and external challenges, it appears to have failed to come up with clear and reliable measures in other areas, except for the military.

### Implications of the Results of the 8th Party Congress

As expected, Kim Jong Un, in his opening speech at the 8th KWP Congress, admitted to poor economic performance, saying “the five-year economic development strategy period wrapped up last year, but the results in most areas fell extremely short of our goals.” Considering that the North Korean people can now know how the economy works through the marketplace (jangmadang) and that they are more exposed to outside information than in the past, the North Korean authorities may have been concerned about a possible backlash that could have been provoked if they had claimed that the economic plan was

successful. Unsurprisingly, the regime attributed the failure of the plan to “severe internal and external situations” and “unexpected manifold challenges.” It also gave the meaning of accumulating experiences and maintaining the principle of “our-style Socialism.”

In his closing speech at the 8th Party Congress, Kim Jong Un suggested three key slogans: “The people are God,” “Single-Hearted Unity,” and “Self-Reliance.” However, he did not elaborate further on the future direction of the country’s economic development other than promoting the supposedly “new” Five-Year Plan for National Economic Development. While declaring the principle that he would reinforce the foundation of a self-reliant economy based on national unity and putting the people first, his remarks show a lack of methodological rigor as he did not present ‘how’ this could be realized. The regime emphasized the importance of ‘ideological armament’ as a solution for making a breakthrough in the country’s struggling economy, and, in line with this, Kim Jong Un, during the closing address, repeatedly emphasized “strict discipline in the entire Party and the whole country and amongst all the people.” Nonetheless, what matters is economic resources, without which no vision or solution is promising. In this regard, the Party Congress also suggested the possibility of purging some of the country’s powerful elites on charges of corruption and confiscating the foreign currency funds of rich merchants who have been supported by these elites.

As noted earlier, it was not economic development but the military buildup that the regime showed off at the 8th Party Congress. Kim Jong Un himself also considered the country’s nuclear weapons program and the strengthening of self-defensive power as the biggest achievement. By referring to the super-large multiple-launch rocket system, the North Korean version of the U.S. Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), and the new type of cruise missiles as ‘advanced tactical nuclear weapons,’ Pyongyang also demonstrated that these short-range missiles that could reach the entire Korean Peninsula can also carry a nuclear warhead. They also tried to give the impression that the projectile, believed to be a new Inter-continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), that had been revealed during the military parade marking the 75th anniversary of the KWP last October, has gone beyond the developmental stage and reached the completion stage. North Korea also announced that it is aiming for the modernization of conventional weapons, including new main battle tanks, implying that their military expansion is not focused solely on nuclear forces. In addition, in his report, Kim Jong Un declared that the regime will continue to modernize the military through the development of Hypersonic Glide Vehicle (HGV), the modernization of medium-sized submarines, the design and development of a nuclear-powered submarine,

the development of unmanned strike platforms, and the acquisition of military reconnaissance satellite.

The remarks imply that the ‘Byungjin Policy’ will not just be revived, but further expanded. Of course, it is hard to take this declaration at face value. However, Kim Jong Un may have presented such a rather exaggerated blueprint with several intentions. Firstly, given the poor performance of the country’s economy, he may have intended to give the people hope for the future by emphasizing the achievements in the military. Secondly, he may have used the performance review and outlook on military acquisitions as a demonstrative display aimed at South Korea and the United States. Thirdly, this seemed to reflect Kim Jong Un’s intention of using the ‘Second Economy’ (defense economy), as an engine to escape the current economic crisis.

With respect to the country’s foreign policy, Pyongyang showed its perception that the current state of inter-Korean and U.S.-North Korea relations was not its responsibility, and therefore it is the positions of Seoul and Washington that should be changed in order to improve the situation. Indeed, during the Congress, the reorganization of the powerful elites was also made. One of the most noticeable changes was the ostensible downgrade of Kim Yo Jong, the sister of Kim Jong Un, and the demotion of the existing negotiators with the South and the United States. From the reorganization, one could infer three outcomes. First, that despite the controversy over the so-called “delegation of authority” or “No. 2 leader,” no one in North Korea can actually seize absolute power except for Kim Jong Un. Second, Kim tried to strengthen the loyalty competition among elite groups by warning them that they could not maintain their position if they made an error. Third, the assignment of personnel at the 8th Party Congress is the North Korean version of the “revolving door,” and at the same time, reflects Kim Jong Un’s distress at finding the right person to break through the current crisis.

## **North Korea’s Future Direction and the ROK’s Response**

To overcome various concerns, Pyongyang is expected to take steps to strengthen internal solidarity while expressing exaggerated confidence for the time being. The massive military parade and large-scale events during the 8th Party Congress could be understood in this context. In terms of external relations, North Korea is likely to expand and develop its bilateral relations with China and Russia, and this may lead to visits to these countries by Kim Jong Un or other top North Korean officials. With regards to its policy towards

Washington, on the other hand, it is expected that they will not propose dialogue first in order to show that time is on their side. In terms of inter-Korean relations, Pyongyang, while ignoring Seoul's proposals for talks, will conduct the firing of various short-range projectiles or test new weapon systems that could reach the entire Korean Peninsula.

Given these trends, South Korea's policy towards the North may need to take a breather. At this stage, Seoul should be restrained from making comments or sending messages in response to every remark by Pyongyang, as this could further raise their wishful thinking. At the same time, Seoul should instead criticize the Pyongyang's unreasonable criticism towards the South and their acts of escalating military tensions. In addition, with the inauguration of the Biden administration, Seoul and Washington need to examine whether there is any possibility of disagreement over their North Korea policy. Criticisms in the U.S. Congress and policy circles in Washington over the passing of a controversial bill prohibiting the sending of anti-Pyongyang leaflets by the South Korean National Assembly may exemplify this. At the 8th Party Congress, North Korea unveiled plans to be able to load nuclear warheads on weapons systems capable of reaching the entire Korean Peninsula at any time. Hence, Seoul must double its efforts to secure sufficient measures to counter such North Korean threats and also bolster plans such as the country's Defense Reform 2.0.

\*This article is a English Summary of the Asan Issue Brief (2021-02).

(‘북한 8차 노동당대회 분석: 말의 성찬(盛饌) 속에 감춰진 평양의 고민’, <http://www.asaninst.org/?p=79059>)