

Security and Diplomatic Implications of the DPRK's 8th Party Congress

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At the 8th Party Congress held in five years, North Korea presented the people-first policy as its new political guideline. However, on the other hand, it placed the advancement of nuclear weapons as its utmost priority and its stance against South Korea and the US was rather strong. This was certainly in contrast to predictions that North Korea would deliver a more conciliatory message to draw outside support for its attempts to focus on the economic sector, which has deteriorated due to insistent sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that North Korea promised to “ensure productions and constructions in order to guarantee the wealth of the people, and respect the dire living needs of the people” is aligned with *aemin* (love for the people) politics, characteristic of Kim Jong-un’s domestic policy. Nonetheless, North Korea has not only been emphasizing the construction of socialism “for the people” but “by the people.” It has argued that “the only society in which the people are the owners is a socialist society.”¹ Additionally, North Korea has stressed that strengthening its military capabilities will be the only means to deter external threats to the socialist regime and achieve peace and prosperity. Therefore, the logical conclusion is that exerting greater efforts to strengthen its national defense

¹ Kim, Ki-cheol, “A scientific explanation of the relationship between socialism and democracy via the Juche Ideology.” *Kim Il-sung University Journal*, Vol. 58 No. 3 (2012), pp. 25–26.

centered on nuclear armament is ultimately paving the way for the happiness of the people. It can be seen that North Korea underscored “self-strength” through the increase in nuclear force in the military sector and “independence” through the principle of reciprocity in the diplomatic sector according to such logic.

Military Modernization and Reinforcement of War Deterrence

What is worth noting in the revised party rules is that the party has changed its *modus operandi* from “military-first politics” to “people-first politics.” However, this is not to say that North Korea has attempted a U-turn from its military-oriented policy, as the rules did not mention whether it was going to revise the *byung-jin* line in pursuit of economic and nuclear development. Rather, it provided that the government will continue to work on building nuclear weapons and presented very specific military tasks for such. Among the major achievements and decisions related to North Korea's nuclear development, the following are particularly noteworthy.

Firstly, North Korea clearly conveyed its intentions to advance its nuclear deterrence capability against the US. North Korea declared the goal of increasing its accuracy in striking and destroying any strategic targets within a range of 15,000 kilometers.² Through this, it has removed the ambiguity surrounding the extension of missile range and its multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) technology. The range of the Hwasong-15 has been estimated to reach 13,000 kilometers,³ but North Korea has made it clear that it is capable of striking targets at a further distance. Regarding its MIRV technology, which has been the subject of considerable debate, North Korea implied that it is getting closer to being combat ready, stating that they are “in the process of completing research projects to fully refine the MIRV technology.” Given that North Korea has been conducting tests of its substructure system since 2017, we cannot take their claim of having almost reached the completion of the technology lightly. However, it is expected that careful deliberation will be taken prior to actually testing the long-range missile, which could throw the Korean Peninsula and the neighboring region into chaos.

The second point worth noting is the following quote, stating that “national

² Headquarters Political Press, *Rodong Sinmun*, January 9, 2021.

³ Michael Elleman, “North Korea’s Third ICBM Launch,” November 29, 2017; www.38north.org, www.kida.re.kr/eng

defense capabilities have risen to a level to which they can preemptively gain control over hostile threats from outside the territory.” The capability to strike from outside its territory is linked to the development and operation of SLBMs and new submarines, and North Korea revealed that the modernization of medium-sized submarines and research on nuclear submarine designs are in the final stages of screening. A combination of long-range operational capabilities through the development of nuclear submarines and the capabilities of SLBMs with increased range can be considered as a major deterrent against the US. Considering North Korea's light-water reactor construction and uranium enrichment technology, we cannot rule out the possibility of the country having reached a certain stage in its nuclear submarine reactor design and fuel-producing capabilities.⁴ Even without the application of cutting-edge technology at the international level, its weaponry may still be capable of being used in combat. North Korea is likely to pursue such changes as they provide North Korea with the conditions to confidently execute its “tit-for-tat” strategy against the US.

The third notable point is its stance on the principle of nuclear use. North Korea stated that “its goal was to advance its capabilities for preemptive and retaliatory nuclear strikes.” North Korea has mentioned that the purpose of the use of nuclear weapons lies both in the options of using them for “preemptive” and “retaliatory” measures. It has also mentioned that it “will not misuse nuclear weapons unless the hostile adversaries aim to target us with nuclear weapons,” maintaining the ambiguity of the condition of preemptive nuclear usage. “Unless the hostile adversaries aim” means that the “intentions” are important and that it can be interpreted that they could use nuclear weapons not only during the execution stage, but also during the preparatory stage. Furthermore, the fact that they used “misuse” instead of “use” likely means that they “will not use it unfairly beyond certain standards.” What these standards refer to is open to rather flexible interpretation—it seems that the North intentionally used strategic ambiguity.

A fourth point worth noting is the North’s emphasis on the tactical aspects of nuclear weapons. North Korea stated that it has developed miniaturized, lightweight, and

⁴ In November 2010, North Korea invited Dr. Hecker and others to the Yongbyon nuclear complex to show the construction site of a 100MW light-water reactor. There is the possibility that North Korea will use this experience to build small nuclear reactors for submarines. North Korea possesses high enriched uranium technology and facilities, so there will be no major issues in fuel procurement.

standardized weapons for tactical weaponization and that it has “established a complete nuclear shield to conduct its operational mission.”⁵ This means that North Korea has prepared its nuclear force to undertake various operational missions. In addition, North Korea emphasized that it will obtain intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities by using military reconnaissance satellites and unmanned aerial vehicles. This will be an especially significant concern for the allied forces in South Korea, since the use of military satellites can further enhance the precision of tactical weapons. It is also worth noting that the North has implied that it will begin the development of hypersonic weapons that can evade the current missile defense system of the ROK-US alliance, electronic weapons, and unmanned strike equipment.⁶ This can also be seen as part of a strategy to expand and strengthen its asymmetric advantage over the allied forces.

Finally, it is necessary to pay attention to the revised party rules. North Korea stated in the “section on the struggles and tasks for the cause of national reunification” that it will “protect the stability and peaceful environment of the Korean Peninsula by overpowering fundamental military threats with its strong defense capabilities.”⁷ They discarded the unrealistic strategy of “pulling US troops out and inspiring revolution in South Korea to accomplish reunification,” formerly mentioned in the party rules. Instead, they argued that they are capable of directly dealing with South Korean and US forces militarily. It can be interpreted that this is based on the confidence that “strategic stability” can be achieved by strengthening its deterrence against the ROK Armed Forces and the USFK. Additionally, during future discussions on denuclearization and arms control on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea will try to push for demanding corresponding measures from South Korea and the US instead of undertaking unilateral disarmament.

⁵ Headquarters Political Press, op.cit.

⁶ North Korea is known to have recently established a hypersonic rocket research center with about 300 researchers under the Academy of National Defense Science. Jung, Tae-ju, "Kim Jong-un, Hypersonic Missile Development Drive," *Daily NK*, January 5, 2021.

⁷ "Adopted decision on the revision of the Chosun Workers' Party Rules at the 8th Congress of the DPRK Workers' Party." *Rodong Sinmun*, January 10, 2021.

Reciprocal Diplomacy and the Strengthening of Socialist Solidarity

The following points from North Korea's message to foreign countries are worth noting. Firstly, North Korea mentioned China, Russia, Cuba, and Vietnam as subjects of amicable diplomacy. In other words, while emphasizing solidarity among socialist countries, the North did not issue any messages expressing its willingness to improve relations with liberal democracies. This strikes a contrast with the fact that it mentioned that "if any country treats us cordially, we are willing to improve relations with them" at the 7th Party Congress.⁸ This may be a reaction to the US's move to consolidate its democratic alliances, in turn underscoring the solidarity among socialist countries. Therefore, it is highly likely that North Korea will stick to its strategy of strengthening the strategic cooperation between North Korea, China, and Russia for the time being, rather than making new moves regarding its diplomacy with South Korea and the US. In reality, the North may have considered that its suspension of trade with China has hurt its economy more than the UN sanctions did in 2020 and that China's cooperation is essential for the supply of the materials and technology necessary to modernize its armed forces.

Secondly, it is highly likely that the North will continue to stick with "reciprocity" against South Korea and the US and be uncompromising during discussions on the denuclearization and peace regime. That is, the greater North Korea's confidence in its deterrence against South Korea and the US, the more assured it will be in pursuing its diplomatic strategies. Therefore, while first seeking to strengthen its deterrence to expand its asymmetric advantage over the ROK-US alliance, it can use this as a means of coercive diplomacy. The international community has put forward the diplomatic principle of bringing North Korea to the negotiating table based on the pressure from deterrence and sanctions; it is believed that North Korea is counteracting with similar strategies. Expressions that illustrate the North's confidence in dealing with the US can be seen from how it will use a tit-for-tat principle against the US and its declaration of the goal of "dominating and bringing the US to its knees."

Thirdly, it is expected that North Korea will ultimately leave room for improvement in its relations with South Korea and the US as it still values its relations

⁸ First Secretary Kim Jong Un's report on the project of the Central Committee of the 7th Party Congress, May 8, 2016.

with the US highly. North Korea mentioned that it "excellently demonstrated its dignity and status" by announcing the "joint declaration which confirmed the establishment of a new relationship between North Korea and the US" during the last bilateral summit. It is worth noting that North Korea perceived its diplomatic actions as a normal state's historical achievement, referring to the North Korea-US summit as a "monumental achievement in the history of the world politics," and saying that it still values the Singapore Declaration. Above all, North Korea views the US as the "primary obstacle to the development of the revolution," acknowledging that it cannot complete the construction of socialism without solving the problems between itself and the US.

Fourthly, North Korea did not mention the possibility of a dialogue, regarding its stance toward South Korea, unlike at the 7th Party Congress. Instead, it provided the two options of an arms race and military confidence building. North Korea claimed that the Korean peninsula stands at a "significant crossroads" of "resolving a serious standoff and moving toward peace and reunification, or remaining in a vicious cycle of confrontation and the perils of war." In other words, North Korea's development of nuclear assets and new weapons systems will intensify an arms race between the two Koreas, but if South Korea wants peace and reunification, it should choose to build military trust. The problem is that North Korea is forcing South Korea to choose between the two options. In particular, it is worth noting that it again mentioned its demand that "the import of high-tech military equipment and joint military exercises with the US should come to an end." This issue is hard to solve in that the South Korean government has been pushing ahead with building high-tech forces in accordance with its mid-term defense plan and that military force reinforcement is in line with its defense reform and the transfer of wartime operational control. North Korea is likely to respond aggressively to the ROK-US joint exercises in the first half of 2021 and will again take issue with the fact that South Korea did not accept its demand.

While the COVID-19 pandemic continues, there are limited opportunities for a turning point in the inter-Korean and North Korea-US relations, given that North Korea's diplomatic activities are practically limited. Therefore, if North Korea finds something that can be implemented immediately, it will focus on strengthening its military capabilities to secure military asymmetry against the ROK-US alliance. This will pose a

significant challenge to alliance's strategy to deter North Korea, which in the long term, could lead to regional instability. It is desirable for South Korea to continuously send out strategic messages directed toward arms control and building trust, rather than an arms race. In his New Year's message, President Moon Jae-in emphasized that the two Koreas, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the simultaneous entry of the two Koreas into the UN, should prove together that peace and prosperity of the Korean Peninsula is beneficial to the international community. It is worth noting that shortly after North Korea announced its strategy toward the South at the 8th Party Congress, the South Korean government presented a direction of 'dialogue and win-win cooperation for the nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, with no risk of war.' Declaring the principles of 'no tolerance of war,' 'mutual security guarantee,' and 'common prosperity,' the President underscored that 'trust-building on the Korean Peninsula' had to be an exit strategy. As the South Korean government has put forward a 'step-by-step solution' that starts with quarantine and health cooperation North Korea needs immediately, it is expected to make efforts to expand discussions from issues of soft security cooperation to hard security cooperation. Additionally, it should pursue multilateral efforts to control the supply of strategic materials to slow the pace of North Korea's weapons proliferation. Given that denuclearization and trust-building will promote regional stability and eventually provide the conditions for the development of the ROK-US alliance, South Korea should play an active role in shaping a road map that links denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime through cooperation with the US.