

Analysis of the 8th Political Bureau Meeting of the 8th Term of the Party Central Committee and the Spread of COVID-19 in North Korea

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It appears that North Korea has entered a phase of mass outbreak of the Omicron variant of COVID-19. On May 12, North Korea disclosed the number of confirmed cases and deaths nationwide as the 8th political bureau meeting of the 8th term of the party central committee declared the 'maximum emergency epidemic prevention system' while Kim Jong-un visited the national emergency quarantine command. It appears that the virus began to spread nationwide in late April, and major events including the recent military parade in April were the key catalyst of this outbreak. North Korea is likely to respond by actually achieving herd immunity through a management of the epidemic that focuses on 'isolation'. The degree of the epidemic and how the maximum emergency epidemic prevention system is operated is expected to not only impact politics, the economy, and society in North Korea but also the country's relationship with the international community. North Korea's recent actions related to the advancement of its nuclear arsenal are expected to accelerate as a result of its intent to develop strategic weapons and the desire to convey a message on foreign policy. But there is the possibility that test launches of missiles will not be announced for the foreseeable future due to the pressures associated with announcing these tests amidst the 'epidemic prevention crisis'. From this perspective, the schedule for 'big events' such as nuclear tests is also likely to be adjusted. It is necessary to pay close attention to North Korea's current and future responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, its political motives, and how the response to the pandemic may potentially be manipulated. This study analyzes the intention behind North Korea's disclosure of confirmed cases, the features of the major responsive measures, and the epidemic prevention situation to assess North Korea's anticipated actions, the impact on domestic and international affairs, and the prospect for international cooperation.

During the 8th political bureau meeting of the 8th term of the party central committee held on May 12, North Korea reported that cases of the BA.2, Stealth Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus had been confirmed in the capital city of Pyongyang and adopted a written decision to elevate the country's pandemic readiness to a 'maximum emergency epidemic prevention system'. The political bureau meeting proceeded in the order of the leadership confirming or 'acknowledging' the current state of the pandemic, criticizing areas of prevention, demanding each organization to prepare measures, adopting the written decision transitioning to the maximum emergency epidemic prevention system, and Kim Jong-un's comments on the principles and tasks related to emergency prevention.

Awareness of the Seriousness of the Spread of the Omicron Variant and the Future Responses to Counter the Pandemic

The political bureau meeting defined the current situation as the 'gravest national emergency' in which the country's emergency lines of prevention have been penetrated. In response, Kim Jong-un ordered ① the earliest elimination possible of sources of contraction through the stable containment and control of the pandemic and swift treatment of the disease, ② nationwide regional lockdowns, unit-based isolation of projects, production, and daily activities, and the complete closure of spaces vulnerable to contagion, ③ concentrated scientific testing and treatment as well as the preparatory mobilization of emergency medical supplies, ④ undisrupted completion of economic and production goals, ⑤ minimizing the discomfort and inconvenience suffered by the public and responding to negative consequences, and ⑥ ensuring that 'lapses in security' are prevented by strengthening the guard on the frontlines, the border, at sea, and in the air. Meanwhile, it was reported the following day that on May 12, Kim Jong-un visited the national emergency quarantine command to inspect the state of prevention and examine the spread of the disease across the country.

This is the second time that the 'maximum emergency epidemic prevention system'

has been implemented. It was first enforced by the expanded emergency meeting of the political bureau held on July 25, 2020 following the declaration of a ‘national emergency epidemic prevention system’ on January 28, 2020. Based on the recent meeting’s method of disclosing information, the timing of the meeting, the measures adopted, and precedent, it appears that, on the surface, the North Korean leadership is aware of the severity of the situation and is focused on a quick response. North Korea’s decision to confirm cases of the Omicron virus seems to be based on perceptions about the grave nature of the pandemic. Awareness of the ‘severity’ of the situation can be inferred by prior indicators and the swiftness of responsive measures, the method of disclosing information, and past experiences.

Belated Responses: from Becoming Aware of the Situation to Declaring the ‘Maximum Emergency Epidemic Prevention System’

First, it is necessary to examine the passage of time, logic, and problems of responsive measures adopted from when North Korea first became aware of the situation to when it was revealed through the political bureau meeting. In terms of prior indicators, it is possible that the North Korean government was either unaware of the vast number of patients with fever symptoms that had already occurred immediately before May 4th or had ignored reports. The fact that Kim Jong-un held photo shoots with participants from military parades on consecutive days until May 2 indicates that anomalies had not been detected or that specific measures had not yet been implemented. Then, a temporary nationwide curfew was enforced on the morning of May 4.¹⁾ It is probable that this was a decision made by the North Korean government to check temperatures and conduct preliminary investigations nationwide after learning that fever patients were occurring in large numbers on May 2 and 3 in a concerning manner.

1) “Recent Developments: North Korea implemented, then lifted, a Curfew Yesterday,” *Yonhap News*, May 5, 2022.

According to news reports, the North Korean government reviewed tests of samples collected by fever patients on May 8 and subsequently, the political bureau meeting of the party central committee made the decision to enforce the ‘maximum emergency epidemic prevention system’ on May 12. May 8 is when a conclusion was reached about the samples. Based on the timeline, it appears that after the curfew began in the morning of May 4, data on fever symptoms was collected and patients were initially treated over a span of five days until May 8. This process likely confirmed that “since late April, an unknown disease had rapidly spread across the country”. Reports of Kim Jong-un’s visit to the national emergency quarantine command on May 12 state that 350,000 fever patients have been confirmed. Among those reported, approximately 162,200 patients had recovered while about 18,000 cases had been confirmed nationwide on May 12 alone.

In sum, it can be estimated that North Korea became aware of the situation after May 2nd, conducted nationwide tests on the 4th, analyzed and reached a conclusion on the data from the 5th to 8th, and implemented responsive measures through the political bureau meeting on the 12th. Based on this timeline, it took about 9 to 10 days for North Korea to become aware of the situation and respond accordingly. Though the circumstances are different, this took longer than when the ‘maximum emergency epidemic prevention system’ was first implemented in July 2020. Back then, information was disclosed and measures enforced 7 days after a North Korean defector returned back to North Korea on July 19.

<Table 1> North Korean Announcements Regarding the Omicron Virus

| Date | Announcement |
|---------------------|--|
| April 25 | Military parade held |
| April 26 ~ May 2 | Kim Jong-un takes photos with participants from the military parade on consecutive days |
| May 2 ~ 4 | Acknowledging the severity of the situation, conducting nationwide testing of temperatures amidst the curfew on May 4 |
| May 4 ~ 8 | Collecting and reviewing data from across the country, initial treatment of patients, Confirmation of the Omicron virus |
| May 12 | 8 th political bureau meeting of the 8 th party central committee declares 'maximum emergency epidemic prevention system' – Confirmation of approx. 350,000 cases nationwide, approx. 162,200 patients treated – Approx. 18,000 new daily cases of fever patients on May 12 nationwide |
| May 13 | Approx. 187,000 patients under quarantine and treatment, six deaths(1 confirmed case) |

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Major Events in April and the Recent Military Parade as Key Catalysts of the Spread of the Omicron Virus

When examining recent domestic developments in North Korea in April, there is a consistent timeline from the probability of the spread of the virus to confirmed cases. During the festive revolutionary month of April, commemorative events nationwide in which the people of North Korea participated in were held consecutively while approximately 20,000 people were mobilized for the military parade held on April 25. Participants from military corps and schools across the country not only marched in the military parade but also resided in Pyongyang for more than a month in order to practice for the parade. These participants from different parts of North Korea continued to remain in the capital to attend photo shoots with Kim Jong-un until May 2. Both the military parade and the photo shoots that followed were held without masks. If the contraction of the virus occurred during these proceedings, then the participants that returned home after the photo shoots

may have caused a nationwide spread of the virus. It is also possible that the “particular group of confirmed cases in the capital city” reported at the political bureau meeting might be in reference to a certain group of participants that attended the military parade. It seems that it would have been difficult for the North Korean government to remain silent and ignore the mass outbreak of fever patients that has occurred in Pyongyang and other parts of the country. It is probable that the leadership was particularly concerned with the fact that confirmed cases had been reported in Pyongyang and how it was spreading across the nation simultaneously.

Second, how the confirmed cases were disclosed illustrates how serious the current situation is perceived to be. Since declaring the ‘national emergency epidemic prevention system’ on January 28, 2020, North Korea has held major party meetings to discuss the matter of epidemic prevention. 8 political bureau meetings and 1 executive policy bureau meeting was held in 2020, while 1 party convention, 3 political bureau meetings, and 2 plenary meetings were held in 2021 that had epidemic prevention as its top agenda. In particular, any criticism of major mistakes or key decisions related to epidemic prevention were all discussed during political bureau meetings. Given this, ordinary procedures were followed when the most recent political bureau meeting disclosed the number of confirmed cases and announced the ‘maximum emergency epidemic prevention system’ which might indicate a normal level of concern. Noteworthy, however, is how the current situation was defined as the ‘gravest national emergency’. This phrase can be viewed as the most serious compared to the ones that had been previously used in past political bureau meetings on epidemic prevention to describe the situation. Before, phrases such as ‘epidemic prevention crisis’, ‘major mistakes’, and ‘major development’ had been used.

Recent Loose Epidemic Prevention and the Military Parade despite the Alarming Omicron Virus Threat

Third, the responsive measures announced are also indicative of how serious the current situation is perceived to be. There is a need to compare recent developments to the first enforcement of the ‘maximum emergency epidemic prevention system’ back in 2020. In response to a former North Korean defector, Mr. Kim, returning to North Korea by traveling the Han River Estuary to the city of Gaesong on July 19, 2020, North Korea decided to implement the ‘maximum emergency epidemic prevention system’ on July 25 through an expanded emergency meeting of the political bureau. At the time, a state of emergency was declared, the city of Gaesong was completely locked down, and other measures such as issuing a special warning were implemented. This time, the North Korean government has enforced physical lockdowns such as isolating areas and units nationwide and closing spaces vulnerable to contamination in addition to other steps such as conducting concentrated testing of the entire population. These reactions can be viewed as a high-level of preventive measures even when considering the differences between past and current circumstances. Though the Omicron virus has a lower fatality rate, it has a transmission rate that is 30~50% higher. Given how approximately 350,000 fever patients have occurred since late April and how about 18,000 patients occurred on May 12 alone, it appears more than likely that these patients are confirmed cases of the Omicron virus rather than simple fever patients. Moreover, the 350,000 fever patients appears to be the number of patients that the government has counted based on basic temperature checks considering how North Korea lacks the capacity to test for COVID-19, and patients that have been reported as having recovered from the virus probably were quarantined for a certain amount of time before deemed as recovered. By extension, it is difficult to believe that the number of deaths is accurate when accounting for North Korea’s insufficient capacity to test for the virus.

Since when the Omicron virus first appeared late last year, the North Korean media has consistently reported on statements by the World Health Organization (WHO) regarding the variant, medical explanations on Omicron's dangers and transmission rate, and the spread of the virus in China and South Korea. However, despite the government's close attention to Omicron, the relative loosening of prevention control this year as well as large-scale events in April commemorating the Day of the Sun, the 10th anniversary of the rule of Kim Jong-un, and the military parade celebrating the founding of the Korean People's Revolutionary Army are likely factors that crucially precipitated the spread of the virus. Therefore, the disclosure of information regarding the pandemic through the political bureau meeting is neither unusual nor politically motivated but instead likely indicative of the degree of concern about the spread of Omicron. Meanwhile, it can also be the result of pressure on the government caused by the increased likelihood of a nationwide pandemic as well as confirmed cases and deaths in Pyongyang both related to increased movement due to recent mass events, or as a way to enhance internal credibility through swift responsive measures and controls.

Regional Isolation and Closure and a Response Focused on Quarantine Facilities

Next, it is worth examining noteworthy aspects of the recently announced preventive measures. First is the order to “thoroughly lockdown cities and districts (guns) and to organize commercial and production activities while projects, production, and daily activities are isolated by separate units.” In terms of physical restrictions, these measures correspond to the ‘ultra-extreme’ level of the epidemic grade defined by the emergency law on prevention of epidemics enacted in August 2020. However, activities by individuals remain open, albeit limited, as projects and production continue even as unit-based isolation has been enforced and since there is no mention of school closures.

<Table 2> Epidemic Grade Defined by the Emergency Law on the Prevention of Epidemics (Enacted August 2020)

| Grade | Situation | Responsive Measures |
|---------------|--|---|
| First Degree | 'Possible' inflow of the COVID-19 virus | Border closures, restrictions on the import of animals, plants, and goods |
| Extreme | Existence of an actual 'danger' | Border closures, lockdown of regions with confirmed cases |
| Ultra-extreme | Risk of threatening fatal and destructive catastrophes | Closure of borders, lockdown of all spaces including the land, sea, and air, suspension of group activities and academic activities |

Source: Seungjun Oh, Seunghee Ha, "North Korea's Response to COVID-19: Focus on the Rodong Sinmun (in Korean)," *North Korean Studies Review* 24, no. 2 (2020): 8.

Second, it appears that suspected patients or participants from the military parade are being either inspected or quarantined per unit. This is because "organized administration of concentrated scientific testing and fierce treatment" and "strict concentrated testing, medical surveillance, and active responses for treatment" have been emphasized. However, most tests will be conducted through temperature checks and medical interviews rather than a normal system for testing for COVID-19 due to the lack of test kits and other equipment. As a result, the predominant form of preventive measure is expected to be focused on 'isolating' fever patients rather than testing. North Korea has already announced that 187,800 patients have been placed in quarantine and are undergoing treatment. Given the characteristics of the Omicron virus, treatments are likely to consist of quarantining for a certain period of time before being released in order to prevent the spread of fever symptoms, rather than administering specific medicines. However, it is also likely that further installations of additional quarantine facilities or shortages in everyday items and other goods that are provided during the quarantine period will periodically occur if the number of confirmed cases increases. Meanwhile, North Korea may not feel much need to receive vaccine aid. This is because based on the current spread of the Omicron virus, administering vaccines will likely be ineffective. Even if vaccines

are provided, it may not have much impact since a considerable amount of time will be needed for the vaccine to reach the population. Rather, the North Korean government may even consider the option of achieving herd immunity by accepting the spread of the virus and trying to manage the epidemic without much confusion through appropriate quarantine measures. But in the long-term, it is also possible that the government will disclose information about the current state of the epidemic and later request support from international organizations in order to prepare for new variants of COVID-19 regularly continuing to appear in the future.

Simultaneous Implementation of the ‘Maximum Emergency Epidemic Prevention System’ with Continued Production and Construction: Measures to Minimize Economic Repercussions

The third noteworthy aspect is Kim Jong-un’s emphasis of the continuation of economic projects and production activities as well as the undisrupted completion of construction projects. This appears to be intended to minimize the economic repercussions of the ‘maximum emergency epidemic prevention system’ even though it conflicts with regional and unit-based isolation to a certain extent. An especially noticeable area is ‘imminent agricultural projects’. There appears to be concerns that this year’s agricultural production will suffer immensely if the rice-planting season is missed after the severe droughts this Spring. Likewise, construction activities will probably be forced to continue despite nationwide regional lockdowns. This is because the construction of 100,000 apartments in the Hwaseong area and other major construction projects, both important tasks mentioned in the five-year national economic development plan and at the 8th party congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK), will be unable to meet its goals for this year if they are delayed. In the meantime, the immediate negative impact on the economy of this recent enforcement of the maximum emergency epidemic prevention system will likely not be severe since economic expectations have been lowered, limited trade between North Korea and China has been maintained, and production activities have

been adjusted accordingly over the past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. But the overall improvement of the economy will likely be further postponed as the schedule for resuming trade with China has been further delayed.

Strengthening Social Control through the ‘Maximum Emergency Epidemic Prevention System’ and the Medical Martial Law

There is a need to pay attention to the strengthening of control across society as a result of the transition to a ‘maximum emergency epidemic prevention system’. Since late last year, North Korea has sought a relatively flexible system of epidemic prevention by emphasizing a ‘modern’ and ‘the people’s’ epidemic prevention after initially maintaining a system predicated on strong lockdowns and controls. This is likely to revert to a system of strict epidemic prevention and societal control. Emergency epidemic prevention systems function as medical martial law. According to the emergency law on the prevention of epidemics enacted in August 2020, the command structure for epidemic prevention consists of the Premier of the Cabinet, the Ministry of People’s Armed Forces, the General Staff Department of the Korean People’s Army, central offices such as the Ministry of State Security, the Prosecutors Office, and the Ministry of Social Security, district governors, specialized units, and organizations for national planning. In reality, however, they are led by the military, the Ministry of State Security, and the Ministry of Social Security in order to strengthen control. Offices responsible for public security and peace take the lead on such measures as restricting access to Pyongyang to protect the capital, enhancing surveillance in border areas, restricting the movement of regional goods, charging those in violation of the emergency law on prevention of epidemics with fines, and quarantining patients with suspected symptoms. From this perspective, the ‘maximum emergency epidemic prevention system’ is related to social control, oversight of production and construction, and the efficiency of governance given how it maintains the achievement of goals set for production and construction while inserting tension into society.

In particular, it also has the significance of increasing surveillance of society in response to external pressure and a volatile situation precipitated by North Korea's accelerated process of advancing its nuclear weapons. It can also be transformed into an effective system of controlling the people of North Korea should a nuclear test is conducted or other tensions arise. In other words, the 'maximum emergency epidemic prevention system' can be utilized to not only strengthen the regime's control over society but also to accelerate the advancement of nuclear weapons. While the measure is a response to the rapid spread of the Omicron virus on the surface, from the perspective of societal control it may indicate further internal surveillance and the fostering of a tense political environment in response to tests of strategic weapons and changes to the international situation. Kim Jong-un's comments from the political bureau meeting "especially emphasizing the attention necessary to prevent lapses in security by strengthening the guard on the frontlines, the border, at sea, and in the air" may be related to unifying and alerting the military in preparation against outside pressure due to actions taken by the regime to further advance its nuclear arsenal. The fact that emergency orders for the party central military commission and the cabinet were deliberated, approved, and delivered is also likely related to this aspect as well.

Continued Advancement of Nuclear Weapons with the Possibility of Not Disclosing Missile Test Launches out of Awareness of the Epidemic Prevention Crisis

This recent outbreak of Omicron is not likely to have a significant impact on North Korea's foreign affairs. In particular, the schedule for its tests of strategic weapons necessary for the advancement of nuclear weapons will likely proceed as planned. North Korea is expected to continue its test launches regardless of the spread of the Omicron virus due to its resolve to develop strategic weapons and unchanged foreign policy approach. The fact that North Korea tested its super-large caliber multiple launch rocket system by firing three KN-25 missiles immediately after the political bureau meeting on May 12 can be interpreted as a message that its policy

of advancing its nuclear arsenal and overall foreign policy stance will remain unchanged, regardless of the pandemic. However, there is the possibility that North Korea will not announce its weapons tests out of awareness of the domestic ‘epidemic prevention crisis’. If details are disclosed, it will likely be done after a certain amount of time has passed. The suspected test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on May 4, the suspected launch of a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) on May 7, and the recent KN-25 launch were all unannounced, and this was likely due to the spread of the Omicron virus. It could be internally burdensome to announce missile test launches during the ‘epidemic prevention crisis’ when there is a large number of confirmed cases. Unlike missile launches, the schedule for nuclear tests might be adjusted. Test launching missiles might achieve the effects of confirming technology and sending a message to foreign countries considering how they have continuously conducted since 2020 and the outbreak of COVID-19, as well as the fact that South Korea and the U.S. consistently assess and estimate the range and type of missile launched. Contrastingly, the impact of nuclear test is substantially different and are essentially political events in the sense that North Korea needs to display its nuclear capabilities by disclosing information. This could be difficult for the government to explain to the people of North Korea as it has defined the current situation as an ‘epidemic prevention crisis’.

Need for Proactive Roles of South Korea to Prepare for the Possible Health and Medicine Cooperation on North Korea’s Response to COVID-19

North Korea is not likely to accept humanitarian assistance proposed by either South Korea or the U.S. North Korea, which maintains a firm position against South Korea’s recent increases in military capabilities, gaining the upper hand vis-a-vis the new South Korean government, and coordination between the U.S. and South Korea following the summit meeting, is not likely to adopt a two-track approach by readily accepting humanitarian assistance. In particular, North Korea has accelerated the pace of its testing of tactical and strategic weapons since the beginning of this year to complete the task of developing strategic weapons which was declared at the 8th party

congress of the WPK held last year. North Korea is also likely to pursue a tactic of intentionally maintaining a certain level of tension for its future weapons development. From this perspective, North Korea will not likely try to alleviate the current state of tension in the international environment by accepting proposals for humanitarian assistance.

However, given how a transition to the ‘maximum emergency epidemic prevention system’ has been emphasized, it is possible that North Korea will ask the international community for cooperation on health and medicine to assist with the prevention of further spreads of the Omicron variant, the management of patients, and support for treatment. On January 10, 2022, it was announced that North Korea would “transition from epidemic prevention focused on control to a more modern form of prevention and to the people’s epidemic prevention”. This shift, however, did not result in a more open approach in the form of acquiring vaccines or medicines from the international community or opening its borders. Considering how stealth Omicron is more transmissible and can put pressure on the country’s health system, the severity of the situation perceived by North Korean elites or concern about future uncertainty may be greater than before.

Nevertheless, North Korea may also either maintain or strengthen its response to the pandemic that stresses control by focusing on the isolation of confirmed cases or completely locking down provinces, cities, and districts without the import of foreign vaccines or medicines. The problem is, unless North Korea administers vaccines, the resumption of the import of goods interpersonal exchanges will further be delayed due to an immunocompromised population and concerns about the inflow of new variants. The difficulties faced by the vulnerable members of the North Korean society will only worsen under these circumstances.

The South Korean government needs to assume a more active role in response to the spread of the virus and humanitarian crisis in North Korea, regardless of whether North Korea requests cooperation first. The South Korean government should expand its channels of cooperation with international organizations such as UNICEF and the WHO in order to specifically assess the needs of North Korea and

prepare for crises. It also needs to sincerely consider designated contributions to the COVAX facility to purchase and supply vaccines or medicines for North Korea. The U.S.-South Korea summit scheduled for May should also discuss the possibility of the two countries donating funds and coordinating technical cooperation in response to the epidemic in North Korea. ©KINU 2022

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