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Analysis of the 8th Party Congress of WPK in North Korea(1): Strategic Basis

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Through the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea, North Korea has disclosed its policy directions with a focus on reconsidering its internal stability through externally maintaining a hardline stance toward the unpredictable international landscape and internally self-rehabilitating and strengthening solidarity. Without proposing a new 'strategic direction,' it internally suggested a 'self-reliant strategy' and the strengthening of party regulations and leadership. Against the U.S., North Korea proposed a 'relative response' strategy and to South Korea a 'conditional reconciliation' strategy. Rather than proposing an unrelenting strategic stance, North Korea maintained a flexible stance that depends on the opponents' attitude. Such strategy can be seen as a move to secure greater room to maneuver against the U.S.

Meanwhile, North Korea's declaration of the advancement of nuclear power and the disclosure of weapons development plans seem to be preparatory steps to strengthen its justifications for nuclear development amid the nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia and, at the same time, to block off one-sided denuclearization demands and frame the North Korean nuclear issue into a 'nuclear arms reduction' issue. By proposing a 'conditional reconciliation' strategy, North Korea maintained certain amount of tension while drawing an active South Korean response. By shaking inter-Korean relations, it seeks to induce South Korean response and influence the new U.S. administration's North Korean policies. In the future, South Korea should develop and propose a comprehensive strategy that can guarantee the continuity of the Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula by forming a point of consensus among the two Koreas and the U.S. Also, it should devise specific strategies in light of potential nuclear arms reduction (nuclear arms control) negotiations between North Korea and the U.S.

North Korea has conducted the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) from Jan. 5 to 12, 2021. Through the performance assessment report, Kim Jong-un (Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea at the time of the report; Chairman of the State Affairs Commission here onward) marked an elevated 'strategic status' as the most notable progress of the past five years. However, he remained silent about any positive future prospects. At the conclusion of the Congress, the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission predicted that the external environment is 'stern' and 'acute,' and policies are difficult to operate. Based on such perspective, he focused on developing the internal strength to take the bull by the horns through "reorganizing and reestablishing enduring strength." Especially, the Chairman emphasized stronger party leadership and reform. Externally, Kim showed a pressure card with the declaration of the advancement of nuclear power while sending a 'conditional reconciliation' message to South Korea and a 'relative response' message to the U.S. While outwardly rough, Kim's message leaves room for diplomatic maneuver depending on the behaviors of his opponents in the face of situational uncertainties.

In his introductory remark, the Chairman clarified that the Congress was held despite 'dire and challenging circumstances' under the consideration of the influence that the Congress has on "the change and development of internal and external conditions." Outwardly, Congress was definitely focused on the economy. Two days were spent on reporting on the economy, and the performance assessment report concluded by claiming the 'aggregation of all forces on the construction of a socialist economy' as 'the most important revolutionary task.' Also, he seated a large group of ex-economic bureaucrats on the Politburo of the Party's Central Committee. However, the disclosed economic plan has been scaled down compared to the one proposed at the 7th Party Congress, and the plan seemed to be bent on maintaining the status quo. Certain practical strategies like the expansion of economic cooperation with China may have been undisclosed to the public. Still, the economic strategy proposed in the 8th Congress seems to be focused on reflecting on the initial failure and managing existing 'risks.' Hence, the true meaning behind the 8th Congress seems to weigh toward strengthening internal stability through party

reform, launching the second leadership of Kim Jong-un regime, and sending messages to South Korea and the U.S. This report provides an analysis of North Korea's strategic basis exhibited in the 8th Party Congress.

Introduction: Strengthening Internal Stability without Offering a Strategic Direction and 'North Korean Conservatism'

The message from the 8th Congress seems clear. It conveys North Korea's concerns over the uncertainties of the external environment and the continuation of the current hardships. It is focused on developing organizational stability that can weather the transitional period and maintaining the economy from further degrading. It skimmed off any unreal economic goals and developed realistic ones. It also focused on reorganizing the planned economy and ameliorating the deteriorated financial conditions. Though undersized compared to the 7th Congress, the message portrayed practicality and pragmatism in the face of dire conditions. In other words, it is focused on improving efficiency by correcting the flaws, maintaining the status quo, and muddling through.

Meanwhile, it is interesting that there was no new proposal on 'strategic direction.' 'Strategic direction' is an overarching concept comprised of all important and specific tasks that the party needs to focus on until the next congress convenes. A total of six strategic directions were proposed in the performance assessment report at the 7th Congress, of which 'simultaneous development of the economy and nuclear power,' 'priority of self-reliance,' and 'military-first policy' were chosen as permanent strategic directions. The reason for the lack of new strategic directions seems to stem from North Korea's judgment that rigid strategic directions may reduce flexibility in policy decision-making amid the uncertainties of internal and external conditions.

For instance, due to conditional changes, the 'simultaneous development of the economy and nuclear power' has been declared 'complete' on April 20, 2018, during the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). As in this case, a preemptive proposal of a 'strategic direction'

pressures the North Korean regime to revise the direction as conditions change. Hence, the lack of such directions shows the extent to which North Korea is sensitive to the fluidity of the current state of affairs. North Korea's message toward the U.S. exhibiting a strong-against-strong and benevolence-against-benevolence principle is also focused on 'flexibility,' helping North Korea behave according to its opponent's behavior.

Generally, the 8th Congress was focused on transitionally responding to uncertainties, portraying 'North Korean conservatism.' Based on the conservatism, North Korea maintains room for negotiations while continuing to develop nuclear power until the U.S. removes its anti-North Korean policies. It maintains a 'conditional reconciliation' stance against South Korea that depends on South Korea's faithful fulfillment of past agreements. Finally, it seeks to muddle through with the 'doctrine of self-reliance (*Charkyok Kaengsaeng*)' and party reform and mobilize solidarity in the form of conservatism. In addition, North Korea also seems to have the expansion of Sino-North Korea relations as a side-option. The volatility of North Korea, the U.S.'s North Korea policies, South Korea's role, and the calculus among them may trigger great turbulence in the state of affairs regarding the Korean Peninsula.

Domestic: Practical Political Discourse and Strategy for Maintaining the Status Quo

One important trait of the 8th Party Congress is its focus on political discourse and tactical strategies as opposed to offering macro and comprehensive strategic directions. Abstract ideologies and rhetoric were skimmed off, and tasks were presented in terms of practical ways of resistance. In the performance assessment report of 7th Congress, 'Glorious Victory of *Juche* Ideology and Military-first Politics' was introduced at the very first section as an independent chapter and 'the Kim Il-sung-Kim Jong-il-ization of the entire society' was given great emphasis. However, at the 8th Congress, the concepts of '*Juche* Ideology' and 'Military-first Politics' were absent and Kim Il-sung-Kim Jong-il-ism was briefly introduced twice in the report.

Of course, Kim Il-sung-Kim Jong-il-ism has been formalized and legalized on the preface of the revised version of the party bylaw, strengthening its status as a ruling ideology. However, its significance has remained at the symbolic level rather than becoming a logic comprising an 'ideological system.' Reflecting on the steps Kim Jong-un has taken, he seems to prefer practical political discourse over establishing deep ideological systems. Contrary to the 7th Congress, Kim Jong-un did not hang the images of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, rarely spoke of their names, and proposed no specific 'ideological system.' This shows Kim Jong-un's willingness to break away from his predecessors' glories or abstract ideologies and to display his own power and practical political grip.

Such practicalities are reflected also in Kim Jong-un's proposal of resistance strategies. In the preface of the party bylaws, he formalized 'people-first politics' as the fundamental political principle. In doing so, the 'people-first politics' seems to have replaced the initial foundational approach of 'military-first politics.' People-first politics has been emphasized since around 4~5th year of Kim Jong-un's rule, but this was the first time that it was formalized as a 'way of doing politics.' Furthermore, he has aggregated the 'era of state-centrism,' 'people-first politics,' and 'the doctrine of self-reliance (*Charkyok Kaengsaeng*)' into a single set of ways of doing politics and resistance. The set is a combination of the perception of the times as a time of state-centrism, people-first politics as a way of doing politics, and the doctrine of self-reliance as methodology. He specifically defined the 'doctrine of self-reliance' as a permanent political direction to reverse sanctions into opportunities for internal endurance. This can be seen as a practical approach to managing the current state of affairs by comforting the people. Kim Jong-un's concluding remarks on unchanging principle (*i-min-we-cheon*), being unified as one (*il-shim-dahn-gyeol*; ideological perspective), and doctrine of the self-reliance (*Charkyok Kaengsaeng*; policy demand) can be understood in the same context.

External: Pressuring the U.S. and Preparing for a North Korean-style Nuclear Reduction through the Declaration of the Advancement of Nuclear Power

North Korea has sent a strong message on the ‘advancement of nuclear powers until hostile North Korean policies have been withdrawn.’ It has also sent a ‘conditional reconciliation’ offer to South Korea that depends on South Korea’s execution of past agreements. Amid the international uncertainties, the intention behind North Korea’s approach seems to be to wait for responses by proposing principled and strong stances and specific demands. However, it has left room for negotiation by suggesting that the key in developing North Korea–U.S. relations lies in America’s withdrawal of hostile policies and that they will maintain a strong–against–strong and benevolence–against–benevolence principle.

However, depending on the U.S.’s response, an open declaration of the advancement of nuclear powers may become a cause of strife between North Korea and the U.S. Although North Korea has continually expressed its willingness to develop strategic weapons through notions like nuclear deterrence or war deterrence, it has never declared such a strategy so openly before. Such a strategy can be understood as a means to increase negotiating power by emphasizing its ‘strategic status’ as a world-class military power. Second, it can also be understood as a means to strengthen its justification for nuclear development through bandwagoning on the nuclear arms race among the U.S., China, and Russia. Third, it can be seen as a means to prevent the Biden administration from pursuing strategic patience or demanding a one-sided denuclearization. Finally, it is a preparatory step toward reframing the North Korean nuclear issue into a ‘North Korean-style nuclear reduction’ issue.

Kim Jong-un has likely disclosed the list of weapons—multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV), hypersonic missiles, nuclear submarines, submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), and military reconnaissance satellites—wittingly since many of those weapons are the ones being competitively developed by the U.S., China, and Russia or being developed or bought by South Korea. Also, such disclosure is a groundwork for making the jump from a de facto nuclear state

into a state that requires ‘nuclear disarmament or nuclear arms reduction.’ Kim Jong-un might have taken the Biden administration’s consideration of applying the nuclear disarmament option into his equation. The incoming U.S. administration will likely express regret toward North Korea’s declaration of the advancement of nuclear power. However, it does not necessarily breach the initial North Korea-U.S. agreement on stopping nuclear and missile tests. Depending on how U.S. policies unfold and whether North Korea begins its tests of weapons, the possibility of a strong confrontation is not excluded.

The ‘relative response’ message delivered in the 8th Congress is a strategy that refrains from expecting too much from the U.S. and eagerly asking for a North Korea-U.S. negotiation. It is based on a cautious stance to behave versatily based on U.S. behaviors. Flexing its muscles by laying out specific steps to develop nuclear weapons while leaving room for negotiations, North Korea actually shows how much it expects of the negotiations. Meanwhile, North Korea also seems to be alleviating the uncertainties of North Korea-U.S. relations by strengthening its ties with China: it has promoted the China expert, First Vice Director of the International Affairs Department Kim Song-nam as the Director of the same department; and the Party Congress announced that the leaders of North Korea and China have publicly exchanged congratulatory telegrams.

Against South Korea: Demanding Active Behavior from South Korea by Proposing Conditional Reconciliation

The message toward South Korea requires careful interpretation. Externally, North Korea maintained a hardline approach with demands for resolving ‘fundamental problems’ such as purchasing state-of-the-art military equipment and conducting joint South Korea-U.S. military exercises. However, the approach actually seems to be focused on demanding an active role from Seoul. In his report, Kim Jong-un emphasized actively resolving and improving the currently dire relationship between the two Koreas, treating the inter-Korean declarations seriously and carrying them out faithfully, and that only strictly managing and fundamentally eradicating abnormal

and non-unified behaviors will open new ways to improve inter-Korean relations based on firm trust and reconciliation. While conditional, his words are grounded upon the possibility of reconciliation, showing that more weight is given to a demand for South Korea's active role.

Passing the buck to South Korea and playing the conditional reconciliation strategy is connected to North Korea's message to the U.S. North Korea probably judged that sending a principled, hardline message to the new U.S. administration would be more effective when a certain amount of tension has formed by reminding them of the 'military threats in the Korean Peninsula' and requiring certain action from South Korea. It could use military issues that South Korea cannot easily resolve to put more pressure on the message to the U.S. That 'inter-Korean relations can return to how it was three years ago depending on how South Korea behaves' means that North Korea is going to put joint South Korea-U.S. military exercises on the table and see how South Korea behaves. It also means that North Korea is demanding South Korea of a more active behavior.

Fundamental issues at hand are the stopping of the joint South Korea-U.S. military exercises, purchase of state-of-the-art military equipment, and other South Korea-U.S. alliance-related issues. By shaking the key factors in inter-Korean relations, North Korea seeks to persuade the U.S. and induce a change of its behavior. The persuasion may be for the operation of a South Korea-North Korea-U.S. trilateral channel that suits the Biden Administration. The inter-Korean talks before and after the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics had led to South Korea-U.S. talks and eventually to North Korea-U.S. talks. The so-called 'South Korea-North Korea-U.S. trilateral channel' played an important role in bridging the trust gap between the parties. The new strong-against-strong and benevolence-against-benevolence principle (relative response), 'conditional reconciliation,' and the preferential settlement of fundamental issues may all be means for North Korea to use the key inter-Korean issues to manipulate the new U.S. administration to its liking.

Suggestion: Necessity to Present a Comprehensive Plan on North Korea at a Comprehensive, All-Encompassing, and Multidimensional Scale

To strategically respond to the message presented in the Congress, it is necessary to take a step further from suggesting one-off cooperative proposals and to respond proactively and preemptively based on a comprehensive initiative. Systemizing the ‘fundamental issues’ regarding the inter-Korean agreements raised by North Korea and proactively responding to them can help resolve the situation. It is also essential to take an aggressive stance in proposing issues comprehensively according to their scales. The issues include proposals for the framework of dialogue, working groups to implement the agreement, talks for resolving military threats, the formation of the rapid inter-Korean joint military committee, and proposals regarding existing issues such as individual tourism, humanitarian cooperation, and quarantine cooperation.

Such a comprehensive initiative should be designed with considerations on the missions of sending a message of cooperation to the new Biden Administration and the second leadership of Kim Jong-un regime, forming the South-North-US trilateral consensus zone and connecting President Moon’s Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula to the next government’s policy toward North Korea. Besides, in the short term, it is necessary to establish detailed strategies in response to the potential North Korea-U.S. bilateral negotiations for nuclear disarmament or nuclear arms control. The two parties’ conceptual understanding of nuclear disarmament may vary to a large extent, and hence, a mere North Korea-U.S. contact is not promising. Therefore, it is necessary to establish strategies in response to a new negotiation structure, such as the new inter-Korean relations in the nuclear disarmament or nuclear arms control process and the status of South Korea in a multilateral structure.

The Biden camp seems to have a consensus on its stance on nuclear disarmament or nuclear arms control in North Korea. It envisions a complete elimination of nuclear weapons in North Korea as an ultimate goal of its nuclear arms control policy. It contrasts with some stereotypes that advocate a certain degree of reduction. It is an approach that provides certain countermeasures to North

Korea through a phased approach while strictly applying measures and verification systems for practical denuclearization at the level of disarmament. On the other hand, North Korea's concept of nuclear disarmament tends to signify symmetric nuclear disarmament presuming the nuclear disarmament of both North Korea and the United States (including extended deterrence and withdrawal of the hostile policy toward North Korea). South Korea needs to prepare for cooperative nuclear disarmament and reduction of mutual threats that overcome these differences. ©KINU 2020

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