

Analysis of the Results of North Korea's 9th Workers' Party Congress: A Sweeping yet Hollow Display of Achievements and an Emphasis on Hostility Toward South Korea

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North Korea held the 9th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (hereafter, the 9th Party Congress) over seven days, from February 19 to 25, 2026. Through the 9th Party Congress, Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission (hereafter, Kim Jong Un), was confirmed again as General Secretary of the Workers' Party but a large-scale generational reshuffle was also carried out, where 161 of the 250 members of the Party Central Committee was replaced. In doing so, it further consolidated Kim Jong Un's power base while reinforcing the mechanism of loyalty competition surrounding the supreme leader.

Through his opening speech and the congress work report, Kim Jong Un congratulated himself by claiming that "progress had been made in all sectors" since the 8th Party Congress, and also assessed that the goals of the second five-year economic development plan had been largely achieved. The greatest driving force behind these accomplishments was praised as Kim Jong Un's personal capabilities and qualities as the supreme leader. In this sense, the 9th Party Congress can be seen, from his perspective, as an opportunity to showcase both his continued strength and the regime's durability.

The key characteristics and policy implications that emerged during the 9th Party Congress can be summarized as follows: (1) the emphasis on Kim Jong Un's personal achievements

and his completeness as the supreme leader; (2) the continued, if indirect, indication of vulnerabilities in the economic sector despite extensive propaganda touting achievements; (3) the intention in the military sphere to pursue a dual-track policy of “nuclear weapons and the economy” as well as “nuclear forces and conventional forces”; (4) a power structure that, despite a political generational shift, avoided risk-taking, alongside a succession scenario involving Kim Ju Ae that remains only a possibility; and (5) the clear expression of hostility toward South Korea.

In particular, in the military sphere, North Korea made clear its intention to continue building up its military capabilities despite economic hardship. Among these efforts, it signaled its determination to steadily secure the capabilities needed to sustain its theory of “Relationship between two belligerent States” by incrementally strengthening weapons systems aimed at South Korea on a year-by-year basis. North Korea also reaffirmed its longstanding position that expecting or pursuing its denuclearization, reform, and opening is itself a hostile policy. At the same time, it emphasized that it has no desire to resume inter-Korean dialogue, exchanges, or cooperation.

In light of this, the direction of our future North Korea policy should be to avoid fixation on short-term results and instead approach the issue with patience and fidelity to principle. In particular, South Korea should avoid letting wishful thinking about an early U.S.-DPRK dialogue weaken or sideline the goal of denuclearization. South Korea should also remain alert to the possibility that the North Korean leadership’s hostility and belligerence toward South Korea could translate into actual provocations. Furthermore, if the United States shows no meaningful movement toward negotiations with North Korea even after U.S. President Trump visits China in April, and if North Korea responds by staging a more forceful demonstration of its enhanced nuclear and missile capabilities, South Korea and the United States should also have a joint response plan in place for how they will react.

Characteristics and Policy Implications of the 9th Party Congress

1. The Promotion of Kim Jong Un’s Personal Achievements and the Emphasis on His Completeness as Supreme Leader

The most notable feature of the 9th Party Congress was its apparent effort to portray Kim Jong Un as a supreme leader standing shoulder to shoulder with his predecessors, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. At the 8th Party Congress, North Korea made this point clear through its revised Party Rules, which stipulated that “the highest programme of the Party is to model the whole society on Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism.” In doing so, it underscored that the roots of Kim Jong Un’s legitimacy still lie in the so-called *Baekdu* *bloodline*, originating with Kim Il Sung. In many respects, this Party Congress was less a serious

forum for discussing state affairs or policy direction than a thoroughly orchestrated stage for regime propaganda.

Even where shortcomings remained in the Party's performance over the past five years, Kim suggested that responsibility lay not with himself but with Party officials. In the end, this revealed his intention to further solidify the foundations of his rule by encouraging loyalty competition among the power elite.

2. Persistent Signs of Vulnerability in the Economic Sector

The 9th Party Congress focused less on presenting a new policy vision than on publicizing the achievements of the past five years. It did not provide any figures on target attainment rates or gains in productivity. This review of the economic sector suggests that North Korea's second Five-Year Plan for Economic Development may also have effectively ended in failure. North Korea recorded economic growth of 3.1 percent in 2023, measured in terms of real GDP growth, and is estimated to have posted 3.7 percent growth in 2024, marking two consecutive years of growth in the 3 percent range.

Moreover, North Korea's decision not to disclose specific figures may itself suggest a considerable gap between the regime's statistical propaganda and the economic conditions actually felt by ordinary North Koreans.

3. Commitment to double *Byungjin* (Parallel Development) Policy

Since the Kim Jong Un era began, North Korea has espoused the *byungjin* line of simultaneously developing the economy and nuclear forces. Although Pyongyang declared during the brief period of inter-Korean dialogue and U.S.–North Korea negotiations in 2018 that it would shift to a strategy focused on the economy, in practice it has continued pursuing a *byungjin* policy centered on the advancement of its nuclear capabilities. The “double” *byungjin* approach—simultaneously building the economy and nuclear weapons, as well as nuclear and conventional military forces—was clearly reaffirmed at the 9th Party Congress, despite the risk of renewed economic hardship.

Through this Party Congress, Kim Jong Un conveyed the view that there is no need to separate national defense from the economy or to weigh one against the other in terms of priority, while also signaling his determination to continue strengthening missile capabilities aimed at South Korea and modernizing conventional weapons systems. This can be interpreted as part of a long-term strategy for prolonged rule: maintaining a hostile stance toward the South while guaranteeing the military's institutional interests through a defense industry-centered economic strategy, thereby securing both the military's loyalty and broader political stability.

4. Political Generational Turnover While Avoiding Risks

The 9th Party Congress highlighted a generational reshuffle among North Korea's power elites, including the retirement of Choe Ryong-hae, but this was largely an extension of a trend already underway since the 8th Party Congress rather than a fundamental transformation of the regime. Rather than signaling a major break with the existing elite structure, the reshuffle appears to have been aimed at further strengthening a sense of shared fate among newly elevated officials and intensifying competition in loyalty to Kim Jong Un. Kim's post-congress decision to present key party and military officials with newly developed sniper rifles can likewise be interpreted not only as a form of North Korea's characteristic "gift politics," but also as a political message urging them to internalize his confrontational approach toward South Korea and the outside world.

Meanwhile, Kim Ju-ae was not officially designated as successor at the congress and was given no formal party position. This may partly reflect her young age, but it also suggests that reports portraying her succession as already well underway may be premature. By contrast, Kim Yo-jong's promotion from vice department director to department director indicates that hereditary succession to Kim Ju-ae is not yet in its final stage. For the time being, Kim Ju-ae is likely to remain less a substantive successor than a symbolic figure intended to project the long-term durability of the Kim Jong Un regime.

5. Showcasing North Korea's Standing within the Anti-U.S. Alignment and Explicitly Expressing Hostility toward South Korea

Another notable feature of North Korea's Ninth Party Congress was that it sought to highlight the country's status as one pillar of an international anti-U.S. front, while at the same time making its hostility toward South Korea, based on the existing notion of "Relationship between two belligerent States," even more explicit.

With regard to the current international order, the congress emphasized the importance of international anti-U.S. solidarity and subtly showcased North Korea's position within that alignment. Another noteworthy point in the external message of Kim Jong Un's report is that, despite the visibly strengthened DPRK–China–Russia alignment throughout 2025, there was no mention of relations with either China or Russia. To be sure, it is not unusual for external messaging in traditional party congress reports to be relatively limited. Even so, while Kim's report delivered clear messages toward South Korea and the United States, the fact that closer North Korea–Russia ties and the recovery of North Korea–China relations, both developments that could have been promoted as major diplomatic achievements, were not prominently highlighted raises questions.

This may indicate indirect dissatisfaction that, despite the outward appearance of North Korea–China–Russia solidarity, diplomatic, military, and economic support from China and Russia has not yet reached a satisfactory level. It may also reflect an effort to avoid creating the impression that Kim Jong Un’s achievements are attributable to Chinese or Russian backing. Another possible interpretation is that, as suggested in Foreign Ministry statements, it reflects Pyongyang’s latent unease over the fact that China and Russia have not responded more forcefully to U.S. foreign policy. Still, North Korea’s external perceptions cannot be conclusively assessed on the basis of the messages from the Ninth Party Congress alone, and the issue requires continued tracking and analysis.

South Korea’s Responses

In essence, North Korea’s message can be distilled into the following: if South Korea seeks to improve inter-Korean relations, even on a superficial level, it must (1) acknowledge North Korea’s status as a nuclear weapons state, (2) accept its superior position within the framework of a “hostile two-state relationship,” and (3) persuade the United States to pursue bilateral negotiations with North Korea without denuclearization as an agenda item. Clearly, such choices are not consistent with the current policy direction of the South Korean government. Against this backdrop, the future direction of our North Korea policy can be broadly summarized in three main points.

First, there is a need for a principled approach grounded in patience rather than an obsession with short-term results. Behind the sweeping self-congratulatory tone displayed by North Korea at the 9th Party Congress lies the potential discontent of its people over current economic and social conditions, as well as the regime’s desire to tighten internal control. Even as Pyongyang seeks to project its stature both domestically and internationally, the underlying dilemma of a regime and system that remains vulnerable to change is still clearly present. In light of this, rather than pursuing unilateral measures toward North Korea in the name of realizing a so-called “peaceful two-state relationship,” as some in our society have advocated, what is needed is a broader strategic approach aimed at drawing North Korea onto a path of dialogue and change, while also revitalizing efforts to promote the inflow of outside information and culture into the North.

Second, South Korea should avoid letting wishful thinking about an early U.S.-DPRK dialogue weaken or sideline the goal of denuclearization. Under current circumstances, reinforcing the ROK-U.S. readiness posture against North Korea’s nuclear and conventional threats, while making clear that denuclearization remains a non-negotiable objective, would in fact be more conducive to effective U.S.–North Korea negotiations.

Third, South Korea must remain alert to the possibility that the North Korean leadership’s hostility and belligerence toward South Korea could translate into actual provocations.

Following the 9th Party Congress, it is necessary to review our capacity to respond to a range of scenarios, including possible North Korean efforts to formally redefine its border with South Korea, such as declaring a “maritime border” in the West Sea, violating the Northern Limit Line (NLL), or intensifying aggressive reconnaissance activities near the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) on land. In particular, if the United States shows little sign of renewed engagement with North Korea even after President Trump’s visit to China in April, or if North Korea proceeds with heightened demonstrations of its nuclear and missile capabilities, Seoul and Washington will need to begin prior consultations on how they should respond.

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