

Half Full or Half Empty? North Korea after the 7th Party Congress

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Is the glass half full or half empty? Although this question is held up by pop-psychologists as a test of whether one is optimistic or pessimistic, it may be taken as making an epistemological point: one cannot tell the direction of a change by looking at the current state. A change can be fully appreciated only when it is seen over a longer period and in a larger context.

Was the 7th Congress of the Korean Workers' Party half full or half empty? The fact that the ruling party of North Korea held its congress for the first time since 1986 is well known. It is also well known that the party reasserted the country's status as a nuclear-weapons state and its willingness to remain so and that Kim Jong Un was reconfirmed as the leader of the party and ruler of the country. Those outside who were looking for signs of change in the North's nuclear posture or leadership have thus dismissed the congress as little more than the continuation of the status quo.

While it is true that the congress confirmed these two important continuities, however, they belie important changes made there. The congress signaled a step back from the brink in terms of its nuclear posture as well as its relationship with the South and the United States. Only when its decisions are set against the country's recent past can the breadth and significance of these changes be appreciated. That the changes were confirmed by the following Supreme People's Assembly and subsequent policy announcements not only adds to their significance but underlines their potential to chart where Pyongyang is headed, although that course will also be affected by

the responses of outsiders, particularly Washington, Beijing and Seoul.



Continuities and Changes in Kim Jong Un's Power

Although Kim Jong Un's title changed from First Vice Chairman to Chairman at the party congress, this was a change in title only. Since he rose, or was raised, to the top position after his father's death in December 2011, he has tightly held to it and has taken steps to consolidate it. He has busied himself connecting with various sectors of the society, from anti-Japanese guerilla "patriots" to youth and children, from generals to foot soldiers, from party elites to grassroots cell "enthusiasts" (aka activists), and from local managers to workers and farmers.¹ He has increased the number of young men's military enlistments, at least partly in response to repeated U.S.-ROK military exercises that Pyongyang holds up as a menace, while unsparingly awarding honorary medals, pins

and flags to countless individuals and organizations, just as Kim Jong Il did to shore up public support. He had consolidated his power, unchallengeable by anyone in the near future, perhaps by the time - certainly after - purging Jang Song Taek, his uncle, erstwhile patron, and potential rival, in December 2013. The congress, seen from the perspective of Kim Jong Un's power, was an anticlimactic nonevent, a coronation ceremony that made official his consolidation of power that had already been apparent.



Ri Yong-ho
Kim Yong Nam

It does not mean there were no surprises, though. There were a few. One of them was that the top leadership showed a remarkable degree of stability, perhaps disappointing those who were looking for signs of fissure or vicissitude within the regime. Despite well-publicized news about the 2012 removal of Ri Yong-ho from Chief of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army as well as the purge of Jang, the party congress made few changes at the top leadership. The Politburo Presidium, the power of powers, had been occupied by Kim Jong Un and Kim Yong Nam, President of the Supreme People's Assembly, since the 2012 Party Representatives' Conference. It retained the two original members, but it also added Choe Ryong Hae and Hwang Pyong So, the former and the current Director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army. Also included was Pak Pong Ju, Premier since 2013.



**Choe Ryong Hae
Hwang Pyong So**

It is notable that Choe and Hwang, despite past and current roles as the most influential military leaders, have been civilian party apparatchiks all their lives, working primarily with youth/labor organizations and the party's organizational bureau respectively. Choe and Hwang's rise to the top military post signaled a dramatic reversal of military generals' rise and the military's ascendance over the party under Kim Jong Il, the father of Jong Un; and their assumption of the most powerful political positions a consolidation of the party's superiority over the military. All the rhetorical reverence to his father notwithstanding, Kim Jong Un completed at the congress the reversal of the military first politics in favor of the consolidation of the party's power.

Pak Pong Ju's promotion to the top echelon

indicates a similarly important change. He was promoted to not only the Politburo Presidium but also the Central Military Committee. Pak, serving his second term as Premier, is an economic technocrat who had previously managed a food factory and a chemical factory and once directed light industry as a whole. The election to the CMC of the like of him is both rather unusual and noteworthy because it was accompanied by a rising wave of economic and foreign policy bureaucrats who were promoted to more powerful positions at the congress. When seen together with other changes, Pak's rise seems to be part of a larger shift in the personnel make-up that privileged the party over the military as well as economic and foreign policy bureaucrats over military generals.



Pak Pong Ju with Hu Jintao, 2013

The demotion of several individuals is just as significant as, and consistent with, the promotion of the aforementioned. Most notable is the disappearance of Li Yong Mu and O Kuk Ryol from the Politburo. Both were life-time soldiers and Kim Jong Il's key confidantes. These full members failed to be elected even as candidate members of the Politburo at the congress. Li had been Vice Chairman of the powerful National Defense Commission, "a command post of the ruling elite" under Kim Jong Il's military first politics, since 1998, more than a decade before Kim Jong Un became First

Vice Chairman in 2012.² O also had been a key figure as a Vice Chairman of the NDC since 2009. Their failure to make it to the Politburo accompanied a general downward movement of generals in not only the Politburo but even the Central Military Committee.

Another important change concerns the number of participants at the 7th Congress. The meeting was attended by 3,467 “representatives with voting rights” and 200 “representatives with speaking rights.” This was more than 10% increase from the respective numbers at the 6th congress. If they were selected according to the same ratio to party members as 36 years ago, these numbers would indicate about a 10% increase in the number of party members to the total of approximately 3.5 million out of the population of 25 million.³ The KWP has always prided itself on being a “mass-based party,” and its membership has likely grown in recent years.



An obvious, and perhaps most important, change lies in the fact that the Korean Workers Party held the congress at all. The last time the party held its congress was October 1980, 36 years ago. It was required by its bylaws, until it rescinded the clause on the timing of a congress in 2010, to hold a congress every five years, but repeatedly failed to presumably due to the country’s economic slowdown (and disastrous collapse in the 1990s) and difficulties in making a plausible economic development plan. Given that Kim Il Sung is said to have pledged in 1987 that no party

congress could be held unless the party made an epoch-making improvement in people’s livelihood, the party leadership must have decided that it had accomplished some economic improvements and was now in a position to make a development plan. Kim Jong Un indeed proposed a “Five Year Strategy of National Economic Development” for 2016-2020. This was the first time that the party made a multi-year development plan since the 1980s.

Lee Jongseok, a leading North Korea specialist in South Korea, suggested that the congress signified that the party had normalized its overall functions and restored “the system before Kim Jong Il” in which the KWP led the state, society and the military.⁴ Not only did Kim Jong Un organize a series of party meetings from the Representatives Conference and Party Enthusiasts Conference before the congress, but he took steps to replenish the party personnel, restore the party structure, and reclaim its central place in the country. The new system is clearly distinguishable from the previous one that Kim Jong Il constructed in which the military played a central role in overcoming the nation’s crisis. The father’s songun “military first” policy is in retreat, and his ad hoc style and reliance on the military has been replaced with a return to party leadership. The 7th Congress thus signals at least the will, or possibly a process in motion, to transform what Wada Haruki characterized as the “yuugekitai kokukai [guerilla state]” or “seikigun kokukai [Regular Military State]” to the party-led state, the halcyon normalcy of communist parties.⁵ The process culminated in the Supreme People’s Assembly meeting in June that replaced the National Defense Commission with the State Affairs Commission (SAC) and the supreme leading organization of the state.

Changes in Byungjin Policy to Simultaneously Develop Economy and Nuclear Force

Because the 7th Congress repeated the byungjin policy that Kim Jong Un had announced in March 2013 stating that he would simultaneously pursue economic development and nuclear defense, its nuclear policy was greeted with near unanimous dismissal within South Korea. President Park Geun-hye characterized the policy as “a far-fetched assertion” that was unrealistic. Kim Gap-Sik, researcher at the South Korean government’s Institute for National Unification, added that it was unrealistic because it pursued “nuclear first, economy second” and the two were incompatible.⁶ Even liberal or progressive commentators shared the view that the party congress made few new decisions. Jang Yong-Seok, a researcher at Seoul National University’s Institute of Unification and Peace, commented that “all have been said before,” and Chung Chang-Hyon, Director of Institute of Korean Modern History, indicated “there was no change from the previous position.”⁷

Contrary to the near unanimous interpretation, however, the congress made an important and surprising change in its nuclear posture even if the change was belied by a continuity of the “byungjin policy.” Kim Jong Un took a step back from the brink of the first strike doctrine by announcing that “we will not use nuclear weapons first unless aggressive hostile forces violate our independence with nuclear weapons.” Not only did his announcement add an authoritative interpretation of the North’s domestic law on nuclear forces but, more significantly, reversed the nuclear first strike posture maintained until the congress.

The Supreme People’s Assembly had in 2013 passed a law on the “status of the defensive nuclear-weapons state” which stipulated that “its nuclear force might be used only with the Korean People’s Army Supreme Commander’s final order to repulse and retaliate against a hostile nuclear-weapons state if it invades or attacks the republic,” leaving open the possibility of nuclear first strike. Jeong Uksik

and others indeed interpreted the clause as a first strike doctrine that allowed the North’s military to retaliate against a conventional invasion or attack with a nuclear strike.⁸ But Kim Jong Un proved them wrong at the congress by clearly establishing the no first use doctrine.



More importantly, his announcement reversed the trend that the North’s nuclear posture had steadily escalated in the direction of the first strike doctrine since 2013. In March of that year a Foreign Ministry spokesperson alluded to the possibility of a nuclear first strike in his announcement that the country “was bound to exercise the right to strike first with nuclear forces at the headquarters of invaders.” Two years later, Foreign Minister Li Su Yong elevated the level of warning to emphasize Pyongyang’s ability: “We can now deter the United States, and possess the power to strike first if necessary.” Pyongyang took a step further in March this year when Foreign Minister Li remarked that we “are ready to strike the U.S. with nuclear forces first.” Li Myong Su, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, specified the military’s readiness in April that “we will implement the first strike of the most severe punishment from the sky, ground, seas and under the seas without warning or notice” after listing “various nuclear weapons, intercontinental ballistic missiles, and submarine launched ballistic missiles.” The

North had in short raised the first strike warning from possibility to capacity to readiness since 2013, and yet abruptly reversed the trend at the party congress to announce the unexpected “no first use” doctrine.

The announcement was not only unexpected but also surprising in light of the fact that the Obama administration maintained the option of a nuclear first strike against the North and that the US-ROK Combined Forces Command adopted OpPlan 5029 that the North regarded as a first strike plan. Also the party congress’s unilateral decision to step back from the first strike was unusual in that it deviated from the principle of reciprocity - “words for words, action for action” as in a Six Party Talks agreement - that Pyongyang had long steadfastly maintained. While it is too early to know why the congress made the reversal, I suggest that Pyongyang’s de-escalation might be an opening move to start a new round of negotiation with Washington.⁹

The opening move was indeed followed by a more concrete proposal for a denuclearization of the Korean peninsula on July 6th¹⁰. A government spokesperson made five demands in a statement that looked like its initial position in a negotiation: make public U.S. nukes in South Korea, abolish nuclear weapons and bases in the South, guarantee that the U.S. will not bring in nukes to the South, promise not to use or threaten to use nukes against the North, and declare the withdrawal of the U.S. forces that held authority over the use of nukes in the South. He indicated that if these demands were met, Pyongyang would reciprocate. While he did not detail what the reciprocation might entail, he alluded to the denuclearization, making his demands look like a proposal for negotiation. It is noteworthy that the statement was issued by “a spokesperson for the DPRK government,” a level higher than a more typical spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry, and that it invoked, for the first time

since June 2013, “the will left by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il” to denuclearize the peninsula. It is remarkable that although Pyongyang thus maximized the authority of the proposal, its demands were a recycling of previous ones or elements that had been included in previous agreements in one form or another. On the issue of U.S. troops in South Korea, it even retreated from its previous demand for their withdrawal: it asked merely for a declaration of their withdrawal.

Consistent with its step back from nuclear brinkmanship, another important change was made at the 7th Congress although it too was little recognized, much less appreciated. Reversing the confrontational stance toward the Park Geun-hye government, Kim Jong Un proclaimed dialogue and negotiations as the “fundamental method/principle [基本方道]” of the inter-Korean relationship. It is notable that he did not regard dialogue as a temporary tool but something more enduring and fundamental, suggesting the possibility that Pyongyang could reorient its stance away from confrontation and conflict and toward dialogue and exchange. At the Congress, Kim indeed fleshed out the principle by explicitly suggesting that the current tense situation could be overcome with dialogue and negotiation, and that a North-South military meeting was needed to defuse the current tension.

The reorientation announced at the congress was subsequently followed by concrete proposals. The Military Affairs Commission and then the Ministry of the People’s Armed Forces proposed to their counterparts in the South to hold a working level contact in order to arrange a military meeting. Also at a joint conference of DPRK government, political parties and social organizations on June 9th, the participants called for a joint meeting with their counterparts in the South, expressing their “willingness to meet with anyone regardless of political views, religion, or opinions so long as it helps improve the North-South relationship

and solve the unification problem,” a call that was followed by an invitation sent out on the 27th.

Conclusion

The 7th Congress of the Korean Workers’ Party is likely to be noted by future historians more for the changes it made than the continuities, even if the former are currently being eclipsed by the latter in public discourse. These changes were further institutionalized by the 4th session of the 13th Supreme People’s Assembly, and expressed in the two new initiatives subsequently taken by Pyongyang: a joint meeting of the governments, political parties and social organizations of the North and the South; and a five-point proposal for a denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. The congress was a turning point for Pyongyang’s policy orientation toward dialogue with Washington and Seoul.

It is of course impossible to tell why the congress made such a shift. The changes may be a sign that the ruling party is caving in to the pressure of the sanctions highlighted by the Obama and the Park Geun-hye governments although it will not publicly acknowledge this. Also it is possible that it has finally dawned on Kim Jong Un that he must revive the country’s economy and, in order to do so, he needs dialogue and cooperation with the world. It should not be dismissed that the latest peace offensive may be a disguise for a disingenuous ploy to undermine the sanctions regime, drive a wedge between Washington and Seoul, or buy time to build more nuclear weapons. Nor should the imperative to develop the economy be under-appreciated.

Kim Jong Un had from the beginning of his rule in 2011 highlighted the imperative to improve the people’s material livelihood, and formalized his priority in the form of byungjin policy in what Frank called “a Solomonic decision” to upgrade the economic priority without

explicitly downgrading his father’s emphasis on the military.¹¹ Set against Kim Jong Il’s songun, the “Military First” policy, the son’s simultaneous development line signaled a major reorientation away from the military toward the economy. The fact that the party congress was held under his rule served to confirm the byungjin policy’s “correctness” while it institutionalized the policy further by adopting the Five Year Strategy of State Economic Development and elevating Pak Pong Ju and other bureaucrats to positions of higher authority. As if to demonstrate the new orientation to domestic as well as international audience, Kim Jong Un has within about 40 days since the congress made 14 “on the spot guidance” visits, all except one at economy related “spots,” from soap and salt to kimchi and cookie factories. The one exception was a visit to the National Defense University, and even there Kim emphasized the need for “new and useful knowledge” and called on education workers to be pragmatic, synthetic, modern, and information-centric in their approach.

Noting a growing emphasis on the economy, some even argue that the true meaning of the byongjin is that the military is expected to take a second seat or play a supportive role for the economy. Kim Ji Young of North Korea supported Chongryon’s Chosunshinbo to argue, after the launch of the Hwasung-10 Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile capable of reaching Guam, that the purpose of strengthening nuclear capability lies in “further accelerating economic construction while solidifying the nation’s defense.”¹² Michael Madden took a step further and interpreted the Supreme People’s Assembly’s June decision to create the State Affairs Commission as a signal that “resources and attention can shift to (or at least share co-billing with) domestic economic development.”¹³ Suffice it to say that while we do not know Pyongyang’s true intentions, its reorientation created another opening for diplomacy.



Not only was the opening unrecognized by most, however, it was greeted with Washington's and Seoul's refusal to engage Pyongyang. If the Park government's refusal was not surprising, the Obama administration's strong-armed policies seemed counterproductive. One of Obama's first reactions was to agree with Japan's Abe in a summit meeting held about two weeks after the 7th Congress to "strengthen the deterrence capability against the North's threat." The Department of the Treasury tightened economic sanctions in June by designating North Korea as a "primary money laundering concern" and calling on the international community to cut financial transactions with the country. On July 6th, the Department of State released a human rights report that detailed Pyongyang's abuse of human rights, and the Treasury, on the basis of the report,

sanctioned 15 individuals and eight organizations, including Kim Jong Un, the first time Washington singled out a foreign government leader as a sanctions target for human rights abuse. Washington's hard-line measures culminated in the announcement on July 8th that a THAAD missile defense system would be deployed in South Korea.

The timing of the sanctions against Kim Jong Un was particularly unfortunate, for Pyongyang announced its 5-point proposal for denuclearization on the same day. The two governments had apparently moved according to their respective internal clocks without consulting, much less negotiating with, the other. Taken aback by the Obama administration's hard-line measures, Pyongyang seems to be re-adjusting its policy orientation at the moment. Its foreign ministry spokesperson characterized the sanctions against Kim as "a declaration of war" and severed the only communications channel open with Washington. Only time will tell whether this marks the beginning of the end of the short-lived reorientation toward dialogue or Pyongyang could somehow find the momentum to sustain its reorientation.

Related article

Rüdiger Frank, [The 7th Party Congress in North Korea: An Analysis of Kim Jong Un's Report](#)

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Notes

¹ See [here](#).

² Ilpyong J. Kim, "Kim Jong Il's Military-First Politics," in Young Whan Kihl and Hong Nack

Kim, eds. *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 64-65.

³ At the 6th Congress, a representative with voting rights was elected per 1,000 members and a representative with speaking rights per 1,000 candidate members. The population estimate is [from CIA's World Factbook](#).

⁴ Lee Jongseok, “[chonglon] joseonnodongdang je7cha daehoeui uimiwa teugjing [[Overview] The Meanings and Characteristics of The Korean Workers’ Party 7th Congress],” *Jeongchaek beuriping*, Sejong Institute, May 17, 2016.

⁵ Wada Haruki argues that the North Korean state can be characterized as “yuugekitai kokukai [guerilla state]” under Kim Il Sung and “seikigun kokukai [Regular Military State]” under Kim Jong Il. Wada Haruki, *Bukjoseon: yugyeokdaegukgaeseo jeonggyugungukgaro* [North Korea: from Guerilla State to Regular Military State], translated by Seo Dongman and Nam Gijeong, (Seoul: Dolbegae, 2002).

⁶ Kim Gapsik, “[Joseonnodongdang je7cha daehoe bunseog \(1\): chongpyeong \[An Analysis of the Korean Workers’ Party 7th Congress \(1\): An Overview\]](#),” Online Series, CO 16-12, Korea Institute for National Unification, May 11, 2016. It is worth noting that even if Pyongyang placed economy before nuclear force in all its pronouncements, he reversed the order of the two without explanation.

⁷ See [here](#).

⁸ Jeong Uksik, “[Pukhaneui haek doktorin, dareun naradeulgwk bikyohaeboni... \[North Korea’s Nuclear Doctrine, in Comparison with Other Countries’\]](#),” *Peuresian*, May 27, 2013.

⁹ Seo Jaejeong, “[Nodongdang 7cha daehoe ihuui bukan \[North Korea after the 7th Congress of Korean Workers Party\]](#),” *Changbijugannonpyeong*, June 8, 2016.

¹⁰

Robert Carlin, “[North Korea Said it is Willing to Talk about Denuclearization...But No One Noticed](#),” *38 North*, July 12, 2016.

¹¹ Ruediger Frank, “Can North Korea Prioritize Nukes and the Economy at the Same Time?” *Global Asia*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring 2014, p. 39.

¹² Kim Ji Young, “[migugui yogyeogmang ttulhgo nalaoleun \[Hwasong-10 Flew Through the U.S. Anti-missile Network\]](#),” *Chosunshinbo*, June 23, 2016.

¹³ Michael Madden, “[The Fourth Session of the 13th SPA: Tweaks at the Top](#),” *38 North*, Junly 6, 2016.