

The 7th Party Congress in North Korea: An Analysis of Kim Jong Un's Report

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The single most remarkable feature of the 7th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea¹ (WPK) was that it took place at all, after a hiatus of no less than 36 years.

Ever since Kim Il Sung decided in the 1950s that his country needed its own way of doing things, which is often summarized under the term of *chuch'e*, it has been hard to categorize the DPRK as a typical socialist country. North Korea has always been different. It neither joined the military alliance of the Warsaw Pact nor was it willing to engage in the Soviet-led economic cooperation of COMECON. Its ideology moved further and further away from core premises of Marxism-Leninism. With its Hegelian emphasis on "mind over matter", which in North Korea is called "man is master of everything", Pyongyang's ideology stood directly opposed to the key paradigm of Marx's Dialectical Materialism. Even from the perspective of the Eastern European socialist brothers, North Korea was therefore a rather odd and even suspicious member of the socialist family, as countless documents unearthed from archival sources reveal.² But the fact that a Communist party in power did not hold a congress for almost four decades has nevertheless to be regarded as highly unusual.

The 7th Congress was therefore, without doubt, per se a noteworthy event. It marked the continued normalization of the function of the Party that had started in 2010 with convening the 4th Party Conference³, during which Kim Jong Un was officially introduced to the public only one year before his father's passing. Kim Jong Un wants to use the Party more actively and routinely as his major instrument of power.

An optimist would even see indications of a willingness to share some of the responsibility for governing the increasingly complex North Korean society with members of the Politburo. The overall development of the economy, the emergence of a new middle class, and numerous direct and indirect external challenges such as sanctions, but also the Westernization of China and the crumbling state monopoly on information make it difficult for one man alone to keep the system under control.

But aside from the symbolic nature of the Congress, truly big events—such as an announcement of a drastically new economic policy or a switch to collective leadership—were missing. There was no major purge either. Looking back at my November 2015 preview of the Congress, of the two options presented for how it could turn out, Option 1: a "return to a new normal," came closest to reality.⁴

Gearing up for the Congress

The Congress was announced on October 30, 2015. The actual date was only made public roughly a week before the event. It was held for five days, from May 6 until May 10, 2016. The official number of participants, as reported by Kim Jong Un in his opening speech, was 3,467 plus 1,545 observers. The power elite of the country was assembled. Leader Kim Jong Un gave two speeches, both of which were published in full. The state media also printed 40 statements made by other delegates, among them Politburo Members Choe Ryong Hae, Kim Yong Chol, Kim Ki Nam, Ri Su Yong and Prime

Minister Pak Pong Ju.

I happened to be in North Korea for a few days until May 2 and thus had a chance to see how the country was gearing up for the event. The effects of UN Security Council Resolution 2270 issued in early March 2016 were not yet visible; on the contrary, during the week before the Congress, I experienced the most stable supply of electricity ever since my first visit in 1991. There was not a single blackout and there was running water everywhere we visited, even outside of the capital. The rivers and reservoirs were full, which is crucial for the many hydroelectric power stations in the country. The chimneys of thermal power stations were smoking continuously, indicating the availability of coal. This could be a positive sign of increased production or, more likely, a first consequence of China’s new import restrictions: if the Chinese don’t buy the coal, more is left for domestic consumption. On the fields of Hwanghae Province, I counted significantly more tractors than oxen, which is also unusual. Large modern red trucks of a Chinese brand filled the streets of Pyongyang and the countryside. This anecdotal evidence points at brisk business activities, in particular construction, and above all a surprisingly good availability of fuel.

The very nature of the preparations foretold the lack of major reforms. The Congress started in a stunningly old-fashioned way. As Stephan Haggard accurately notes,⁵ the very idea to hold a 70-day battle right before the Congress was an early indicator of the neo-orthodox and socialist-conservative approach that would dominate the event. So-called speed battles (속도전) have been standard components of North Korea’s political economy from the very first Stalinist days of its existence.⁶ The ineffectiveness of these measures should by now have become more than obvious to the Pyongyang leadership. People learn quickly and react with withholding performance and pretending to work. Exhaustion leads to errors that have to be corrected at high cost. The productivity increases of the past years are based on the introduction of elements of a market economy with its more effective incentive system. However, the North Korean state has obviously decided to continue relying on ideological motivation and mass rallies, on keeping individuals busy, and on attempting to perpetuate the spirit of revolution and a state of emergency, rather than laying more emphasis on decentralized, material incentives.



“Comrade, have you fulfilled today’s battle plan?”

The secretive nature of the preparation, too, is a reminder of old patterns. Classical socialist societies were typically obsessed with secrecy, even concerning minor details. When I arrived in Pyongyang on April 26, 2016, no one I talked to knew when the Congress would start, how long it would last or what to expect. Almost everyone was practicing for the torch march or other mass ceremonies, streets were blocked for rehearsals and fireworks were prepared at *Juche* Tower, but it was not clear when these events would take place. There wasn’t even an official confirmation that the venue would be the April 25 House of Culture⁷, though this was obvious as it was covered with white cloth, party symbols shining through.



The April 25 House of Culture getting readied to serve as the venue for the 7th Party Congress

An internal affair

No official foreign delegation participated in the Party Congress. Western press has highlighted this as an important difference from the 6th Party Congress, but we should consider how much sense such a comparison makes. 1980 was not just 36 years ago; it was a time when Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in China were in their early infancy, when Mikhail Gorbachev was five years and three predecessors away from becoming the Soviet leader, when South Korea was a cruel military dictatorship that had just bloodily suppressed the Kwangju Uprising, when the socialist camp appeared to be rock solid and Germany was divided with no sign of any change. In North Korea, there had been no Arduous March, no nuclear weapons program, no space program, no succession of the top leadership, no monetization, no marketization, no inter-Korean summit, no special economic zones, not even a joint venture law. The term “apples and oranges” could hardly be more fitting. The 7th Congress of the Worker’s Party of Korea was an internal affair, but this is less a distinction from the 6th Congress but more a reflection of the changed international environment.

North Korea has in past years featured

prominently in Western media. Aside from the country’s satirical value, there are substantial and justified concerns over human rights, the nuclear program and the danger of a local conflict evolving into a regional and even global confrontation. At the same time, the lack of information on this closed society is often lamented. One would thus expect intense reporting, in particular on Kim Jong Un’s programmatic speech of May 8. The fact that about 130 reporters travelled to Pyongyang to cover the Congress provided hope for deep and analytical stories that would go beyond the usual stereotypes, nicely summarized by Bob Carlin as a “constant repetition of stories from Western journalists about how they feel constrained in their reporting from Pyongyang, alternating with the by-now tired observation that they suspect everything they see is staged”.⁸

The chance to go beyond that was mostly missed. Western reporting was dominated by two issues: the fact that none of the journalists was granted access to the actual Congress venue, and the brief arrest of a BBC journalist who had been in the country on a different assignment.⁹ It would be unfair to say that based on previous experience, it was naive to expect anything else. It was indeed rude and ignorant of the authorities to invite the press to cover an event and then not allow them access to it. And the arrest of a journalist on charges of disrespectful reporting, especially while such a high-profile event was going on, was not very wise. It did not take a PR expert to foresee that this would become a breaking news item that further tarnished the already badly battered image of North Korea.

Truly regrettable, however, is that these issues with their questionable entertainment and sensational value overshadowed what little there was of substantial reporting and discussion of the Congress. Apart from Kim Jong Un’s announcement that his country would refrain from using nuclear weapons first,

Western audiences did not learn much about what had happened at this once-in-four-decades event.

Another possible reason for the relatively shallow Western media analysis of the most important document of the Congress, Kim Jong Un's report of May 8, might have been its limited accessibility. The speech was delivered in Korean. A full version was within hours published by the leading newspaper, the Rodong Sinmun, both in print and online. It was also reproduced by the state news agency KNCA on their website. An English translation¹⁰ was available with little delay. However, this translation was only a summary, with about 2,000 words. The original Korean version¹¹ had 14,000 words, which in a Western language would amount to about 30,000 words.

We thus face the embarrassing possibility that a mere lack of Korean language proficiency or the failure to hire someone with that skill has prevented professional journalists from accessing one of the potentially most important public announcements of the otherwise rather reclusive leader of a country that is of a relatively high importance to the West. Perhaps nobody really cared because our journalists have learned not to take what is publicly said by any politician at face value. Or it was remembered that specialists on socialist countries have for decades faced the trap of Kremlinology, or Pyongyangology in this case – that is, over-interpreting official statements for the simple reason that there is so little available information.

So it could be that our media deliberately ignored the full version of the speech. Academic analysis typically takes longer to emerge due to the slow review and publication process. With this in mind, and aside from the fact that many results of the Congress will not surface for weeks or months, I will nevertheless point out a few passages from Kim Jong Un's May 8 report that I find noteworthy. To

forestall my conclusion: few are encouraging, but some are remarkable.

The Kim Jong Un Speech of May 8

The speech was structured into five chapters.

In the first chapter "Great Victory of Chuch'e Ideology and Sŏn'gun Policy" Kim Jong Un looked back upon the past 36 years and concluded that adherence to a socialist mass line in economic policy, an active fight against ideological indoctrination and guidance by Great Leaders in hereditary succession guaranteed North Korea's survival.

The second chapter "For the Completion of the Socialist Cause" is by far the longest part of the speech, rich in detail. It outlines Kim Jong Un's plans for the development of his country in the next years in the fields of ideology, the economy, and domestic security. In this chapter, Kim introduces the Five Year Plan 2016-2020.

The third chapter is entitled "For the Independent Unification of the Fatherland" and repeats the known official position on Korean unification, along with an appeal to fellow Koreans to join these efforts in the spirit of patriotism.

The fourth chapter carries the ambitious title "For Making the World Independent" and is mainly a criticism of American hegemony. Here, Kim Jong Un repeats a position that has been among the most intensively reported in Western media: that his country will not use nuclear weapons first.

The fifth and final chapter is on "Strengthening and Developing the Party". After lauding the achievements of the past decades under the leadership of his grandfather and his father, Kim Jong Un elaborately and in harsh terms expresses a heavy dose of criticism of the present status in his country, focusing on what he calls abuse of authority, formalism,

bureaucratism, corruption, and decadence.

The next sections highlight a few of the key elements of the speech in more detail.

Chapter 1: Great Victory of Chuch'e Ideology and Sŏn'gun Policy

This chapter is divided into three sections: "Struggle for Victorious Progress of the Socialist Cause", "Proud Success in Building a Strong and Prosperous State", and "Shining Continuation of the Revolutionary Cause". It provides a comprehensive summary of the official view on the history of the past three decades. It is thus very useful if we want to comprehend the North Korean and in particular Kim Jong Un's prevailing self-perception. It also nicely shows the state's approach to portraying the current situation as a successful achievement despite many past and current economic and other difficulties.

There is a lot of talk about shining victories and endless glory. The term socialism is used very frequently, with no sign of giving up this brand image aside from its actual interpretation. The collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and its transformation in China and Vietnam are mentioned implicitly by pointing at the "onslaught of counterrevolution", "tragic events" and the "renegades of socialism". North Korea alone was able to withstand these challenges, as Kim Jong Un notes proudly.

The death of Kim Il Sung in 1994 is remembered as a shock that struck the country just as it was about to make progress on the task of national unification, which is a reference to the planned first inter-Korean summit in 1994 that was then postponed to June 2000. According to Kim Jong Un, the loss of the leader inspired the imperialists to redouble their efforts at military and economic pressure upon North Korea. In combination with major natural disasters, this led to "unspeakable trials and challenges", in other

words to the mid-1990s famine that is euphemistically known as the "Arduous March".

In this "darkest hour" of the nation, "iron-willed" Kim Jong Il took the lead in securing the safety of Korean socialism by adhering to his Military First Policy, which Kim Jong Un describes as his father's "main political style of socialist leadership". The North Korean people faced the choice of living "with the dignity of sovereignty or to once more become slaves of imperialism". They of course chose the former and pooled all their resources to strengthen national defense. As Kim Jong Un notes with a kind of frankness that reminds of some of his grandfather's writings: "...our people enjoy a peaceful and stable existence, without knowing war, even though they do not live in prosperity".¹²

Criticism of China: Hidden among this pathos is one of the analytical highlights of the report as Kim Jong Un suddenly lashed out at his big neighbor and alleged ally China whose absence at the Congress was conspicuous: "Despite the filthy wind of bourgeois liberty and 'reform' and 'openness' blowing in our neighborhood, we let the spirit of military-first rifles fly and advanced according to the path of socialism that we had chosen." By denouncing Deng Xiaoping's famous terminology, Kim Jong Un distanced himself from Beijing in the most undisguised way I have seen in official North Korean announcements in a long time.¹³

Then followed another major shock to the nation, the death of Kim Jong Il. Kim Jong Un reproduces the standard image of this event: how sadness and the feeling of deep loss were turned into determination and strength.

In the first among many critical passages to follow, Kim Jong Un notes how the Party embarked upon a struggle to mercilessly eliminate "abuse of authority, bureaucratism, corruption and decadence". It created the line of parallel development of the economy and of

nuclear weapons, known as *byungjin* (병진). The latter is, as Kim emphasized, not a temporary tactical measure but a long-term strategy.

A discouraging passage for those who expected an expansion of market reforms is Kim’s mentioning of the new buzzword “Mallima-Speed” (만리마 = 10,000 Ri horse), which is an upgrade of the 1958 term “Ch’öllima” (천리마 = 1,000 Ri horse), a typical Stakhanovite movement¹⁵. He explicitly encourages his people to accomplish “the tasks of ten years within only one year”. This is a very extreme policy, a return to pre-reform economic times when decentralized, individual material incentives were almost completely disregarded. In combination with the 70-day-battle right before the Congress, and the 200-day-battle that was announced a few days thereafter, we encounter what looks like a deeply neo-orthodox approach. It remains to be seen what the actual impact of this measure will be, given the previous experience of the population with these and other campaigns and slogans of the past years like “Pyongyang Speed”, “Korean Speed” or “At One Go” (단숨에).

A possible answer to why the introduction of market elements into the North Korean economy is at least verbally discontinued could be found in the next passages of Kim Jong Un’s speech. Echoing his father’s famous 1995 treatise¹⁶, he puts strong emphasis on ideology to stifle the “frantic moves of the imperialists to infect our society with an alien bourgeois ideology and culture”. This corresponds with defector reports and observations on the ground that the new economic opportunities combined with technological advances have led to a profound change in society. It seems that these developments are sufficiently alarming to the leadership to trigger an attempted return to pre-reform economic policies.

Kim Jong Un’s lengthy elaboration on the role of the youth, which he calls a “tricky problem”,

could be another hint at ideological difficulties if we combine it for example with images of yobbish teenagers in Pyongyang that do not fully correspond with the official ideal. For the post-famine young generation, observing others making and spending money has been a daily part of their life. They grow up under very different conditions compared to their parents who experienced a demonetized, much more equal society.



Yobbish youth in Pyongyang

The speech then continues with the proud claim to stand “in the first row of nuclear powers of the world” after the H-bomb test of January 2016, and being a producer of “precise, miniaturized, automated and intelligent high-tech weapons”. The possession of nuclear weapons is promoted as a triumph that “put an end to the bloody history of aggression and nuclear threat by the US imperialists”.

Looking back at the development of the economy since 1980, Kim Jong Un concluded that the foundations for becoming a strong economic power have been laid - a euphemism for the fact that much more is left to be done in this field¹⁷. Then follows a long list of achievements in single sectors, including telecommunication and IT.

It should be noted that Kim repeatedly supported the idea of balanced development (균형적 발전) in the national economy. This is not a new idea, and the internal debate in North Korea has been going back and forth on this issue, so this might not be the final word on the topic.¹⁸ Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that no sector - in particular not heavy industry - has been singled out to serve as a sole magic bullet to save the staggering economy, as this had been done previously. This implies that Kim's return to orthodox positions stops somewhere in the mid-1980s, when a new focus on the prioritization of light industry and agriculture was laid.

Kim also repeated his signature credo¹⁹ of "improving people's lives" (인민생활향상) and identified it as the main target of a number of specific economic measures.

In the third and final section of the first chapter of his speech, Kim Jong Un turns towards the future, and how he sees his own role: "Victory or defeat and the future of the country and the nation depend upon being guided by a Great Leader, and whether... the cause of the Leader is carried on generation after generation... A party without a Great Leader cannot win and will degenerate... the revolution will fail if the cause of the Leader is not appropriately continued."

The latter could be interpreted as telling his people that the very reason why North Korea still exists as a socialist country, while that system survived neither in the Soviet Union nor the Eastern bloc, is because Pyongyang refused after 1956²⁰ to opt for collective leadership and rather introduced hereditary succession. It could also be a side blow at the Chinese. The wording of this passage and its position in the text suggest, however, that the focus is mainly domestic, with a simple message: without a Great Leader, who must be a descendant of Kim Il Sung, North Korea cannot exist.

Chapter 2: For the completion of the socialist cause

This chapter is divided into five sections: "The Remodeling of Society According to Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism", "Building a State that is Strong in Science and Technology", "Strategy to Build an Economically Strong State and to Develop the People's Economy", "Building a State that is Strong in Civilization", and "Reinforcing Political and Military Strength".

'Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism' is a new term that was introduced under Kim Jong Un in 2012. Those who hope to find anything in the speech that comes close to a more detailed explanation of this concept will be disappointed. Paragraph after paragraph, what Kim Jong Un says sounds like this: "The remodeling of the whole society according to Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism means that we must proceed with our revolution carrying Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism as the only guiding line and rely on Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism to build and improve an ideal society of the people".

I suggest understanding the term Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism as a way to subsume more or less all concepts and ideas of the two leaders of the past 70 years, including, but not limited to, *chuch'e*²¹, *sŏn'gun*²², *kangsŏng taeguk*²³, and the Three Revolutions²⁴.

After this rather tiring part, Kim Jong Un once more mentioned the struggle against "evil-minded ideological and cultural infiltration" and the "economic and technical blockade" by the imperialists, as well as the "change of generation in our revolution". Such repetitiveness is noteworthy, since it shows which issues are regarded as crucial by the leader. The recipe for managing these challenges also resembles his earlier remarks: the focus must be laid on ideology and on self-reliance.

Section 2 is dedicated to advances in science

and technology. Such a focus was rather common for other state socialist countries and can be understood in the context of a lack of capital, in particular hard currency, and limited access to international technology through licensing or Foreign Direct Investment. Both require a much more intense indigenous research and development effort, since the latest machines, devices and technologies cannot be imported due to sanctions and lack of funds.

The claim to become a world-leader in all fields belongs to the realm of propaganda. Nevertheless, the state is willing to put money where its mouth is: the new science center on an island in the Taedong River is impressive, and a whole new residential area in Pyongyang has been built for and named after “future scientists”. Kim Jong Un explicitly stressed that “the state budget share of expenses for science and technology has to be expanded systematically”.



Model of the new science center



The newly built “future Scientist’s Street” by night

As core technologies or, to remain with the militaristic language of the report, “main assault targets” for future R&D efforts, Kim Jong Un identified IT, nanotech, biotech, new materials, alternative energy, space technology and nuclear technology.

A pragmatic and practical approach is reflected in the demand that science and technology should “open the way to economic development”. Among the concerned sectors, the production of energy is highlighted as the most crucial part. This corresponds with reality. To achieve this and other ambitious goals, the number of researchers will be “more than tripled” in the coming years. To find the needed talents, local science and technology centers are to be built around the country and connected by the intranet to the new central science center in Pyongyang.

Reflecting Kim Jong Il’s 2009 slogan: “Putting your feet firmly on our own ground, turn your eyes towards the world”, his son demands that the nation “introduce the scientific and technological successes of other countries quickly and according to our own specific conditions”. Against this background, large posters in the new science and technology center pointing to the availability of Western scientific databases need to be understood as

more than just wall decoration.



A poster in the new science center in Pyongyang

Kim Jong Un’s demand that “research institutions and universities should produce high tech products and thus acquire financial resources for research and development” is interesting. It implies that the state is either not able or not willing to fully finance R&D and requires related institutions to generate their own funds. If this works, we will also see further competition among high-tech startups which is rather untypical for classical socialist economies where monopolies were prevailing in the name of economies of scale. The existence of different brands of mobile phones and tablet computers (Arirang, Samjiyŏn, P’yŏngyang, Ullim) produced by different enterprises point into that direction.

Section 3 is dedicated to the economy. It starts with the sober statement that “our country is politically and militarily strong, but the economy has not yet reached the desired level”.

Kim criticizes the uneven development level in his economy and calls for the “strongly accelerated building of an economic power”. Self-reliance and high-tech are promoted as core principles. This includes the expanded use of domestic resources, among which he

explicitly mentions crude oil (원유). The latter is particularly noteworthy. The sudden lack of this key resource after the sudden end of preferential trade agreements with the Soviet Union was one of the major non-systemic reasons for the economic crisis of the mid-1990s. Currently, oil is one of the major import items of North Korea.²⁵ If the leader mentions the domestic production of crude oil in such a central speech, we must assume that reserves have been discovered and plans to exploit them have reached a certain stage of maturity.

He goes on to identify energy and food production as the key challenges concerning North Korea’s economic development. This would be supported by most outside observers; the key and somewhat hopeful issue here is that the man in charge shares this realistic assessment.

Addressing the ways to achieve that goal, in addition to the usual focus on hydroelectric power, Kim Jong Un announced the increase of nuclear energy production, indicating the construction of one or more new nuclear power stations in addition to the existing facilities at Yŏngbyŏn. Needless to say this would potentially also increase the production of material for nuclear weapons.

The main strategic line in agriculture as promoted by Kim in his speech is self-sufficiency. The latter is neither new nor economically feasible, but it is a clear reflection of political rationality, which thus far does not guarantee a stable food supply through the export of manufactured products and the import of food.

A long passage in section 3 of the speech is again dedicated to the need to improve the living conditions of the people, Kim Jong Un’s central political credo. What sounds like the typical promises of any politician is actually a potentially momentous deviation from the strategy of his two predecessors. Despite his

repeated emphasis on ideology, Kim Jong Un very clearly promises his people a better material life. The reasons for doing so are his lack of ideological legitimacy as either the liberator of the country or the right hand man of that heroic figure, and the pressure for tangible economic development emanating from the emerging new middle class.

The problem with such an approach is that failure to achieve the promises would be immediately obvious. International isolation can be displayed as independence, and the lack of systemic reform can be interpreted as a sign of superiority of North Korean socialism compared with the other socialist countries. But once more food, more electricity and more consumer goods have been promised, and once this promise is taken seriously and turns into people's expectations, it will be difficult to sell the non-attainment of these goals as a success. This is not to say that the state propaganda machine will not try doing so; the question is how readily such a message would be received.

Achieving economic development is thus crucial for Kim Jong Un's legitimacy and for the stability of the North Korean system. To that end, a five-year plan (FYP) for economic development from 2016-2020 was announced, marking another highlight of the May 8 speech.

Publicly announced economic planning was an essential characteristic of North Korea as a socialist country until the early 1990s.²⁶ The frequent extensions of the plans betrayed their ambitious nature. But for about a quarter of a century, except for the vague hint at some long-term ten year state strategic plan for economic development²⁷ in early 2011, no regular plan was made public. With the introduction of the FYP, Kim Jong Un returns to a new normal in the field of economic policy, too.

He provides a few details on the targets of the plan, without mentioning numbers. The publication of a more fleshed out version of the 2016-2020 FYP is among the measures to be

expected in the coming months.

So far, Kim first of all stresses the production of electricity. This includes the modernization of existing facilities, the construction of new ones, and the upgrading of the grid. The latter is to be gradually converted into a flexible alternating current system. In addition, the utilization of alternative sources of energy such as wind, tides, biomass and solar power will be promoted.²⁸ The announcement of the construction of one new nuclear power station was repeated.

A long list of details on various sectors follows, including coal, metal, transportation, machine building, chemical industry, and construction. The mechanization of agriculture will be expanded, more fruits, mushrooms and fish will be produced.

While most of the raised issues are important, again few of them are new or particularly creative. It is thus easy to overlook a small passage on animal husbandry that explicitly encourages "individual animal husbandry [개인 축산] by farm families". This is remarkable for two reasons: it acknowledges a growing private portion of the agricultural sector, and it points at the acceptance of family-based work units. The latter corresponds with the rumors about the so-called June 28 measures of 2012 and the May 30 measures of 2014, both allowing farmers to keep more of their harvest and to make their own production decisions, with an indication that this system could be expanded into industry.²⁹

A little further down section 3 we find what an optimist would interpret as a hint at these changes, which seem to resemble the basic idea behind what the Chinese and Vietnamese decades ago called the "dual plan", that is, allowing enterprises to engage in individual production as soon as they had fulfilled a state-set quota: "local areas should carefully plan activities for independent accounting and

develop their local economy in a unique way”. In the Chinese case, local and township enterprises played a crucial role in economic reform after 1978. A pessimist would note that locally managed local industries were established already in the late 1950s, and that the independent accounting system had been introduced back in 1984 and often served as an excuse for the central government not to provide any inputs, rather than giving more decision making power to local units. What matters is thus the way in which all this will be applied. Think of the Korean script, a brilliant tool that was developed in 1442 but not used widely until the late 19th century.

In the following passage on foreign trade we find another side blow at China: “we should improve the one-sidedness of our foreign trade”. Given the recent sanctions, it seems somewhat optimistic when Kim Jong Un continues: “Export of finished products and trade in technologies and services should be expanded, joint ventures... are to be organized so that they contribute to the introduction of advanced technologies”. Tourism is marked as one of the strategic fields in foreign economic relations without providing further details.

The Cabinet, the country’s “economic headquarters” (경제사령부), is tasked to end “manipulation, formalism, and defeatism” rigorously, hinting at substantial but not unusual problems of a bureaucratic state, and to draw up plans for economic development “realistically” (현실성있게).

It is a matter of perspective how to interpret the repeated emphasis on the central role of the Cabinet in the economy. It can be seen as the expression of a typical state-socialist centrally planned approach, but it also puts economic management in the hands of professional technocrats. Again, the actual effect of this measure will have to be awaited before passing judgment. In any case, Prime Minister Pak Pong Ju was later elected to the

Presidium of the Politburo, which is de facto the highest Party organ.

The economic section of Kim’s speech ends with an appeal to give enough room to the single enterprises to fully use the existing rights to management (경영권), which could just be a reference to the independent accounting system established decades ago, or refer to a more recent measure. The same applies to Kim’s call upon enterprises to show initiative and creativity (주동, 창발) to normalize their production.

Section 4 deals with “civilization” including education, health care, sports, literature and arts, and socialist morality.

Again, Kim Jong Un does not withhold his criticism: “the overall level of education, in particular high-school education, has not even reached half of the progress demanded by the Party”. It seems that the 2012 extension of compulsory education by one additional year with a focus on practical and applicable education has not yet produced the desired results.

Preventive medicine (예방의학) is identified as a core strategy in health care. The doctor-designated district system (의사담당구역제) is to be strengthened.³⁰ Traditional Korean “*koryō*” medicine is to be used along with the latest achievements of modern medicine.

The field of sports is covered only vaguely, albeit with the ambition to achieve victories in Asian and global competitions. Given the great fanfare with which this field has been promoted since the early days of Kim Jong Un’s rule, the treatment of this source of soft power in his Party Congress speech appears to be somewhat subdued.

Concerning literature and arts, Kim Jong Un starts his remarks with another critical note: “The field... does not yet produce enough excellent masterpieces that let society beam

with revolutionary enthusiasm... film art should quickly liberate itself from stagnation”.

If we combine this with the leader’s strong emphasis on the youth as discussed above, and with reports about the spread of South Korean culture in the country, this passage sounds rather dramatic. Given the experience of Eastern European socialist countries, it remains to be seen whether such efforts at competing against Western popular culture have a chance to succeed.

A little later, Kim Jong Un repeats a warning which could be observed in official documents and speeches in particular since the 1990s: “We must stifle the imperialist machinations at ideological and cultural infiltration. Thoughts and culture of imperialism are a dangerous poison that paralyzes the healthy spirit of our people and destroys the foundations of socialism. We must embark on a revolutionary ideological and cultural offensive to counter the persistent and mean-spirited schemes of the imperialists... We must prevent alien and abnormal habits from creeping into our society.”

With this statement, Kim moves to the demand to “establish the right moral order and discipline in the whole society”.

Section 5 is dedicated to the strengthening of political and military power. It appeals to the organs of people’s power (인민정권기관), the judiciary, prosecutors, and organs of security and of protection (안전보위기관) to firmly defend socialism. The level of detail is much lower here than in the parts discussed above.

The military is also duly mentioned and tasked to rebuild itself according to the principles of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, under the strict leadership of the Party.

People’s security forces (인민내무군) are called upon to “frustrate the efforts of class enemies and other hostile forces” and intensify their

struggle against crimes that threaten “the Party, the socialist order, life and property of the people”.

The section concludes with an appeal to the workers in the national defense industry to modernize existing weaponry and to expand aerial defense, and to civilian armed forces to improve their readiness to respond to any armed attack by the “US-imperialists, our arch-enemy”.

Chapter 3: For the Independent Unification of the Fatherland

This part is a summary of the widely publicized North Korean view on unification, without any major change or addition.

It starts with the great exploits of Kim Il Sung including his proposal to create the Democratic Confederative³¹ Republic of Koryŏ according to the principle “one country, one nation, two systems”. The Joint Declaration of June 15, 2000, and the Declaration of October 4, 2007, are promoted as core expressions of the unification idea and as the program for its implementation.

Kim Jong Un is very critical of any attempt at involving outside forces in the task of unification. As has been emphasized for decades, North Korea regards Korean unification as a strictly Korean affair. This demand makes sense when contrasted with the German experience, and demonstrates the fear of an external intervention to the disadvantage of the North. It is also an only thinly veiled criticism of South Korea which is accused of unnecessarily involving the United States.

Statements like: “The various political parties in the North and the South should realize contacts, exchange and solidarity to create an atmosphere of reconciliation and unity”, as positive as they sound, are the repetition of numerous previous appeals of similar, often identical wording. They deserve support but do

not constitute any new proposal.

A passionate appeal is directed against South Korean efforts to achieve a “unification of systems”, which North Korea interprets as an attempt at a German-style absorption. Kim denounces the hopes for a collapse of North Korea and demands an immediate end to various propagandistic measures at the DMZ including loudspeaker announcements or leaflets.

Throughout chapter 3 of the speech, threats of a devastating war alternate with offers at cooperation and the promise of prosperity as a unified Korean nation.

Chapter 4: Towards Global Sovereignty

In this chapter Kim Jong Un presents his view on the recent history and the future of international relations. He mentions his country’s successful survival of the collapse of the socialist system and the proud achievement of having developed an H-bomb, and notes that since 1980, his country opened diplomatic relations with 66 countries “including capitalist countries” and entered various international organizations.

Looking at the global situation, Kim identifies an intensifying conflict between “great powers” without, however, explicitly naming China and the United States, although the latter is accused of seeking global dominance and violating the sovereignty of other nations.

Sovereignty is promoted as the most valuable good and a vital issue in international relations that needs to be defended at all cost against vicious schemes under the label of “democracy”, “human rights”, “globalization” and “fight against terrorism”. The latter is characterized as state-sponsored terrorism by the United States and its allies against uncooperative nations. The appeal to the United Nations to stop functioning as a compliant subject of such actions deserves

some attention given the recently ongoing UNSC reform movement.

Other core ideas are that peace and humanity must be protected by arms³², that the collapse of socialist countries does not mean that the socialist ideal as such has failed, and that non-aligned nations should cooperate.

Pointing at its achievements as a nuclear power, North Korea claims that it will play a more prominent and leading position in international relations. This is not new, except for the justification of such claims by the status as a nuclear power. The latter shows that Kim Jong Un sees the benefits of that program very broadly and far beyond the narrow scope of the military realm.

Then comes the passage that has received most attention in Western media:³³ “As a responsible nuclear power, as already declared, our Republic will not use nuclear weapons first. This is under the condition that hostile forces do not violate our sovereignty with nuclear weapons. We will also sincerely realize our duty vis-à-vis the international community not to proliferate nuclear weapons and to strive for the denuclearization of the world.”

The chapter ends with another frequently made statement: “Our Party and the government of our Republic will improve and normalize relations with countries that respect our sovereignty and treat us benevolently, even if they were hostile in the past”. This is mainly directed at the United States and is yet another proposal at diplomatic normalization and the conclusion of a peace treaty to end the Korean War. As usual, this proposal was either ignored or bluntly rejected by Washington pointing to the demand that North Korea denuclearizes first.³⁴

Chapter 5: For the Strengthening and Development of the Party

Looking back at the Party’s history, Kim Jong

Un notes: “The Party has in time and decisively identified and excluded the modern sectarians from its ranks. At a time when our revolution was facing the hardest ordeals and challenges, they sought to seize the opportunity and reached for the highest power of the Party and the state, formed a group inside of our Party and perfidiously tried to degenerate our ideology and social order.”

This is the strongest reference to Jang Song Thaek in this long speech, and the accusation that he and his followers wanted to secure “the highest power” weighs very heavily. After stating the victory that was achieved against such machinations, Kim again mentions the “youth question” and how the party manages it successfully.

On one occasion, Kim Jong Un talked about open disloyalty against the leaders: “We should not remain silent even against the slightest elements that challenge the authority of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il or of the Party... and stifle the attacks and slander of all kinds of class enemies against the Party and the leader.” There seem to be serious concerns in this regard, if we consider the heightened security around statues of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il where in the last years security cameras have been installed.



In recent years, security cameras have emerged at all key monuments like here

in the Mansudae Art Studios

The latter part of the final section contains a battery of critical passages. Despite their sometimes repetitive nature I quote some of them here at length to convey the atmosphere as precisely as possible. The terms “abuse of authority, bureaucratism, corruption and decadence” (세도와 관료주의, 부정부패) appear no less than eleven times in the speech.

“We should bravely break the old frame of formalism and introduce innovation in Party work. Our Party has declared a war on abuse of authority, bureaucratism, corruption and decadence but has not yet fully overcome them. If we tolerate abuse of authority and bureaucratism, then corruption and decadence will spread and arbitrariness and highhandedness will emerge. If these accumulate, enmity towards our Party will sprout. The struggle against abuse of authority, bureaucratism, corruption and decadence, which occur among our Party officials, is to be waged persistently and intensively until these phenomena are eradicated.”

“The Party organizations do not guide economic work comprehensively enough.”

“We must boldly recognize the mistakes made during the advance of the revolution and overcome them early, so that we can show the people the image of a revolutionary and fighting Party.”

“We shall not look at the documents, but at the living people.”

“The party organizations must recognize the mood of the people early and correctly and solve the pending problems so that the broad masses honestly trust and follow the party.”

“The party officials should internalize the views of our leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il about the people and make them their

philosophy, so that in work and in life not the slightest traces of abuse of authority, bureaucratism, corruption and decadence emerge.”

“The party organizations must take decisive measures to analyze the deficiencies that have emerged among officials of various areas, to find their source and to eradicate them. We must intensify the ideological struggle and organizational control of the extermination of these deficiencies.”

“In particular the deficiencies among party officials must be eliminated completely. Party discipline is to be strictly applied against those who commit these acts.”

“Party organizations should abandon bureaucratic methods and styles, they should stop replacing actual Party work by meetings and documents, and change their course to work on the spot and with the hearts of the people.”

“We must eliminate the working style of a fire brigade and... anticipate and prepare for future issues early on. The officials should give up the working style in which the initial enthusiasm abates after five minutes, and rather continue all tasks persistently until the end...”

This is not the first time that Kim Jong Un criticized the behavior of his officials in public. He conspicuously did so in May 2012 during an inspection at the Mangyŏngdae funfair.³⁵ But the variations in his criticism and the significant space given to such remarks in the most important speech of his career should not go by unnoticed. North Korea obviously suffers from the typical shortcomings of any large bureaucracy, be it a large private corporation or a publicly funded organization. Kim Jong Un’s problem is that the entity that is infected with this kind of formalism and bureaucratic behavior is his whole country, and that the resulting inefficiency and ineffectiveness do not just impact the profit of a company or the

research output of a university. These shortcomings threaten his very legitimacy and the stability of North Korea, hence his emphasis.

Some hope is offered by the pragmatic passage “We should not judge the people by their loyalty of yesterday but by their loyalty of today. We should follow the principle to educate and win over the broad masses and deepen our work with them, with the exception of only a handful of hostile elements.” This corresponds with anecdotal reports about the traditional system of social stratification, *Sŏngbun*, losing its importance in determining the options of an individual’s life.

Summary and Conclusion: Interpreting Kim Jong Un’s report

This was not the much-anticipated bold reform speech. However, it included a number of noteworthy passages that shed light on the leader’s self-perception and his blueprint for the future in the fields of the economy, foreign relations, and ideology.

Economy

Among the potentially positive signals is that Kim Jong Un refrained from following the typical socialist fallacy of promoting producer goods over consumer goods. Rather, he emphasized the need for a balanced development of the sectors of the national economy. In fact, he even sounded slightly critical of past economic policies when he stressed that previous investments, which were mainly in the economy’s foundations, need to translate into actual improvements in people’s lives. Developmental economists will be reminded of the debate between supporters of balanced and unbalanced growth in the 1960s. Once again, we see that many of North Korea’s problems are far from unique.

The three fields Kim Jong Un identified as being of key importance suggest that he and

his advisors have a fairly good understanding of the country's actual economic problems: lack of energy, lack of food and lack of consumer goods. The strategies he emphasized for solving these issues were, however, not revolutionary. Rather than focusing on the comparative advantages of his country as a potential producer of manufactured goods and processed raw materials for export, which would generate the necessary funds for the import of food, he said explicitly: "We must realize self-sufficiency in food." Kim Jong Un obviously prioritizes the strategic position of his country over economic rationality, and seems pessimistic about the ability of his country to secure a reliable supply of food through trade. It should be noted that none of this is a uniquely North Korean position.

With the strategic goal being food self-sufficiency in mind, the question is how the leader hopes to achieve the necessary productivity increase. A further liberalization of agriculture was not announced. It seems that for the time being, the reduction in the size of work teams and the increase in the share of their harvest that farmers are allowed to keep and sell on the markets are deemed to provide enough such incentives.

Reflecting the World Food Programme's concerns³⁶ that North Koreans generally have enough carbohydrates but lack adequate supply of fat and protein, Kim Jong Un stressed the need to dramatically expand animal husbandry including privately owned livestock. Raising goats had been introduced by his late father as one key policy after the famine. A few years ago, plans to hold large numbers of cattle on a newly cultivated grass land (Sep'o tableland)³⁷ made headlines but related news have been sparse subsequently.

He did not, however, neglect foreign trade altogether. The leader places high hopes on export and international economic cooperation. He said explicitly: "We will need to expand and

develop foreign economic relations." Joint ventures are supposed to facilitate the import of advanced technology, and through special economic zones, North Korea wants to actively lobby for investments from abroad. Again, this is an ambition that needs a reality check given the tightened sanctions regime, but at least there is no indication of a plan for complete disconnection from international economic cooperation.

Kim Jong Un correctly identified the energy shortage as the central issue for the development of the national economy. In addition to big projects, he also kept up the decentralized solution through the construction of a large number of small- and medium-sized power stations across the country. This idea is not new, but it appears realistic given that the weak national power grid could easily be overstressed by input from large power stations. In fact, the reduction of transmission losses was explicitly mentioned in Kim's speech.

What is remarkable is the ambition to develop domestic crude oil reserves. It would be a major breakthrough for North Korea and a setback for senders of sanctions, if the country had indeed found an import substituting solution to what so far constitutes one of the most crucial bottlenecks in the economy's supply chain.

Signs of pragmatism were visible when Kim Jong Un called upon enterprises to show initiative and creativity to normalize their production, to use the management rights they were granted including the independent accounting system to the fullest extent, and urged the Cabinet as the headquarters of the economy to draw up realistic plans for economic development.

The general mood of the speech concerning the economy was, however, deeply neo-orthodox.

Kim emphasized central planning and

announced a Five-Year-Plan. Both Stalin's Soviet Union and Park Chung Hee's South Korea had such plans. But while the former suffocated individual economic activity and led the country into economic and political bankruptcy, the latter pooled the limited resources of an underdeveloped country and opened the way to its current economic dynamism and prosperity, albeit at a high political and social price. Realistically, we will have to wait until this autumn or next spring to understand whether the plan will be implemented in the classical socialist-bureaucratic way of excessive micromanagement, or whether it will be more of a strategic and indicative nature.

So far, there is little indication that Kim will follow Park's approach to use large enterprises as "private agents of public purpose"³⁸. Rather, he revived mass movements like the 70-day and the 200-day speed battles, and urged his citizens to work even faster at the new Mallima-Speed.

Foreign Relations

Most notably, Kim Jong Un distanced himself from China in a number of ways. He criticized the reform and opening policy as "filthy" and urged an end to trade dependency on the big neighbor. This message was aimed at a domestic audience but will not go unnoticed in Beijing. It remains to be seen whether such offensive rhetoric will foment anger in China, or whether the Chinese have long gotten used to similar broadsides and will just shrug their shoulders and continue with a pragmatic North Korea policy as they did before.

Acknowledging the growing difficulties of an increasingly complex society in adhering to a strictly autarkic development, Kim supported an expansion of foreign trade and international economic cooperation under the condition that all this is done from a patriotic standpoint. The latter is a typical North Korean side condition, in the sense that it is very ambiguous and

subject to interpretation, so that in the final consequence only the leader himself can determine what is appropriate and what is not.

Oscillating between saber rattling and displaying the proud responsibility of a nuclear power, Kim Jong Un repeated his claim that the nuclear program is purely defensive in nature and will only be used in case his country is attacked first. This corresponds with previous statements and with a realistic assessment of the survival chances of North Korea in case it would launch a missile against the United States or any of its allies. Appreciation of this offer by Washington was, however, not forthcoming. It thus seems that for now, the vicious cycle of tests, condemnation, sanctions and new tests will continue, and that the danger of a nuclear arms race in East Asia has not been reduced.

Kim Jong Un seems to draw some hope from the economic crisis in the West, and growing global resistance against US dominance in the fields of economy, military, and culture. This could be a miscalculation if the rise of an increasingly assertive China would make American supremacy look like the lesser evil to many nations in the region. But the recreation of a bipolar world and the outbreak of a Cold War 2.0 would equally benefit North Korea which can thus be expected to support such trends.

Considering the closure of the Kaesong Industrial Park by South Korea in February 2016,³⁹ the tone against the South was relatively mild. On the other hand, there were no new offers, only a repetition of the known unification principles and formulas.

Ideology

In an obvious attempt at further securing his power, Kim Jong Un strongly promoted Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism as the sole dominant ideology in his country. This includes the Great Leader system and an emphasis on

hereditary power succession.

The creation of the post of Chairman of the WPK was not a hopeful sign for those who were hoping that the Congress would serve as a milestone towards a reformed North Korea. It confirmed the one-person leadership of Kim Jong Un, rather than broadening the power base at the top level.

A minor development of the Congress was the inclusion of Kim Yo Jong, said to be the leader's sister, as a member of the Central Committee. She continues making her way through the ranks of power, like Kim Jong Il's sister before her. It will be interesting to see whom she eventually marries, considering the 2013 purge of Kim Kyong Hui's hapless husband Jang Song Thaek. Speaking of Kim Jong Un's uncle, the absence of any major purge at the Congress should also be noted, though this was not very surprising given the clean sweep that had already been underway for years. An entertaining detail in this regard was the re-emergence of Ri Yong Gil, which embarrassed the South Koreans who had reported him to be dead in February 2016.⁴⁰ He became an alternate member of the Politburo and a member of the Central Military Commission.

Strengthening the impression that the Congress signals a "return to a new normal," Kim Jong Un mentioned the next (8th) Party Congress, implying that it would take place around the end of the Five Year Plan—i.e., in 2020. This is not per se a negative sign, if we consider that reforms in China, in Vietnam and in the Soviet Union originated from the top, i.e. the Party. Organs like the Politbureau and its Standing Committee or Presidium can be just symbolic rubberstamp tools of one-person rule, but they also have the potential to serve as institutions of collective leadership. It remains to be seen which direction will actually be chosen, and how this might change over the years.

A major concern seems to be foreign influence

in the form of cultural infiltration. Related warnings were issued repeatedly. Kim Jong Un's emphasis on the youth seems to be another typically socialist feature, but if seen from this perspective, it indicates the willingness of the Party to fight for maintaining its soft power dominance. Criticism of the field of literature and art for not producing enough ammunition to fight external cultural influence on socialist morale will be heard and taken seriously. But if the experience of Eastern Europe is a teacher, this will be a futile effort. The frequent use of terms like abuse of authority, bureaucratism, corruption, decadence, arbitrariness, formalism, highhandedness, and abnormal habits provides hints at the magnitude of the problem.

Conclusion

Should we therefore conclude that the Party Congress achieved nothing except a normalization of the Party-based governance structure, the confirmation of Kim Jong Un as the undisputed top leader, and the announcement of a Five Year Plan for economic development?

It is difficult to argue against such a position. However hard we search for details in Kim Jong Un's speeches, the Party Congress did not initiate a new age of reform and opening. On the contrary, it explicitly rejected such a prospect in the leader's rude words towards the Chinese, indicating a historical low point in the bilateral relationship.

A thin ray of hope is offered by the fact that solid Party rule formed the foundation for the successful gradual changes in China and Vietnam. The explicit mentioning of the upcoming 8th Party Congress points in the direction of a further normalization. And although there was no big breakthrough, Kim Jong Un did not undo the changes of the past; he even talked about private economic activities and about flexibility and decentralized responsibility.

Kim Jong Un repeated his four-year-old promise to improve people's lives. It will be seen whether the related expectations of his people were fulfilled or disappointed by the overall rather orthodox and conservative tone of the 7th Party Congress. The new leader had made big promises when he took power in 2011; he is under great pressure to deliver. At the Congress, Kim Jong Un praised the Party at length for its closeness to the masses and its

spirit of devoting everything to the people. This description now, once again, must stand the test of reality.

This is a greatly extended version of [an article that was originally published at 38North](#).

Related article

JJ Suh, [Half Full or Half Empty? North Korea after the 7th Party Congress](#)

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Notes

¹ This is the conventional English term used in North Korea. In the West, Korean Worker's Party (KWP) is the standard. Both are imprecise, however. Following the official German version "Partei der Arbeit", Labor Party would be the correct translation of [로동당](#).

² The richest source in this regard is the Washington-based Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) at the Woodrow Wilson Center (www.wilsoncenter.org). Among scholars who have published in this field are James Person, Sergey Radchenko, Bernd Schaefer, Balazs Szalontai and Kathryn Weathersby. Inspired by the work done at the CWIHP, I explored East German archives in search of clues on the reconstruction of North Korea's second largest city by East Germany. See Rudiger Frank (1996): *Die DDR und Nordkorea. Der Wiederaufbau der Stadt Hamhŭng 1954-1962*, Aachen: Shaker.

³ Rudiger Frank, "[Power Restructuring in North Korea: Anointing Kim Jong Il's Successor](#)," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 42-2-10, October 18, 2010.

⁴ See [here](#).

⁵ See [here](#).

⁶ The so-called mass line has even found its way into the constitution (Article 13). On May 12, [state media emphasized](#) that North Koreans would endure speed battles of 700 or 7,000 days if necessary. A few weeks later, it became obvious that this was no empty talk.

⁷ Named after the foundation day of the Army. This symbolism is worth noticing. I interpret it as a sign that the Party is party of the military, as it is part of every other segment of North Korea's society. Declaring a "victory" of the Party over the military would, however, go too far, since such a fight has never really taken place.

⁸ Robert Carlin: "[A Second Look: Media Coverage of the 7th Workers' Party of Korea Congress](#)", 38North, 17.05.2016.

⁹ "[Detained and interrogated for 10 hours in North Korea](#)", *BBC*, 20.05.2016.

¹⁰ See [here](#).

¹¹ See [here](#).

¹² Congress of the Korean Worker's Party], *Rodong Sinmun*, 08.05.2016.

¹³ The formulation "we have nothing to 'reform' and 'open'" has been used in North Korean publications before, but usually with reference to Western influence and not at such a high-profile event. See for example: "[Let us adhere to line of building independent national economy](#)", *KCNA*, 17.09.1998, due to geo-blocking best accessible through a Japanese VPN server or through [the archive](#) (the latter behind a paywall).

¹⁴ Or 'pyŏngjin' if we use the McCune/Reischauer system.

¹⁵ The rationale is simple: in lieu of capital and technology, the focus of attempts to increase productivity inevitably is on the remaining factor, labor. Material incentives are underdeveloped in non-market systems, hence ideological motivation including the creation of symbols, slogans, model workers/work teams/factories etc. dominates.

¹⁶ Jong Il Kim (1995): [Giving Priority to Ideological Work is Essential in Building Socialism](#).

¹⁷ Note that he speaks only about having laid the foundations, not about having attained this goal.

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of such discussions, see Phillip Park (2016): *Rebuilding North Korea's Economy*, Seoul: Kyungnam University.

¹⁹ I noticed that slogan on banners shown prominently during Kim Jong Un's first public appearance as the new leader in December 2011. See Rudiger Frank, '[North Korea after Kim Jong Il: The Kim Jong Un era and its challenges](#),' *The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 10, Issue 2 No 2, January 9, 2012*.

²⁰ Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union denounced some aspects of Stalinism

and called for an end to the cult of personality. For a full version of the speech, [see here](#).

²¹ Often translated as “self-reliance” in very general terms, including the economy, ideology, and national defense. The concept has experienced additions and reinterpretations over the years.

²² Usually translated as “Military First”.

²³ This term was popular in the run-up to the 100th anniversary of Kim Il Sung’s birth in 2012 and has ever since been mentioned much less frequently. It can be translated as “Strong and Prosperous Great Country”.

²⁴ Referring to revolutions in ideology, technology and culture.

²⁵ KOTRA (2015): *북한 대외무역 동향* [Trends in North Korea’s Foreign Trade], Seoul: Korea Trade and Investment Promotion Agency. Stephan Haggard in his blog discusses a few irregularities in related trade statistics but agrees that North Korea imports about 500,000 tons of oil from China annually. See [“North Korean Trade and the Oil Mystery”](#), 09.02.2016.

²⁶ North Korea’s official economic plans include: One-Year-Plan 1947, One-Year-Plan 1948, Two-Year-Plan 1949-1950, Three-Year-Plan 1954-1956, Five Year-Plan 1957-1961, Seven-Year-Plan 1961-1970 (extended), Six-Year-Plan 1971-1976, Seven-Year-Plan 1978-1984, Seven-Year-Plan 1987-1993. See Doowon Lee: “Assessing North Korea’s Economic Reform: Historical Trajectory, Opportunities, and Constraints”, *Pacific Focus* VIII/2, Fall 1993, pp. 5-29

²⁷ See [“State General Bureau for Economic Development to be Established”](#), KCNA, 15.01.2011.

²⁸ It is in the eye of the beholder whether the emphasis on alternative sources of energy is the result of a sustainable and environmentalist approach or just born of necessity. In any case, the leader mentioned the elimination of pollution when, a few sentences later, he discussed the necessary modernization of the chemical industry. For a detailed study on that topic, see Robert Winstanley-Chesters (2015): *Environment, Politics, and Ideology in North Korea. Landscape as Political Project*, Lanham: Lexington Books

²⁹ Andrei Lankov: [“Reforming North Korea. It seems that, at long last, North Korea has decided to begin Chinese-style reforms”](#), *Aljazeera*, 30.11.2014.

³⁰ For a recent study of North Korea’s health care system, see Eun Jeong Soh: [“The Emergence of an Informal Health-Care Sector in North Korea”](#), *The Asia Pacific Journal*, 14/11, 2016.

³¹ Occasionally, the English translation of the Korean term 련방 in North Korean news outlets as “federation” leads to confusion. The North Korean proposal very clearly envisions a confederation or a commonwealth, i.e. two separate entities (“two systems”) under one joint umbrella.

³² Numerous examples of this position exist(ed) outside North Korea, including in East Germany, to explain why having a large military and an active military program does not contradict the self-characterization as a peace-loving country. Germans often referred to the Wilhelm Busch poem of 1900 [“Bewaffneter Friede”](#) [Armed Peace]. A fox, pointing at a recently promulgated peace order, sanctimoniously demands that a hedgehog takes off his thorny dress. The hog sees through the fox’s intentions and refuses, thus securing peace by being armed.

³³ Eric Talmadge: [“North Korea will not use its nuclear weapons first, Kim Jong-un tells](#)

Congress”, *The Guardian*, 08.05.2016.

³⁴ “U.S. says N. Korea should first demonstrate denuclearization commitment before talks”, *Yonhap*, 19.05.2016.

³⁵ “Kim Jong Un tours Mangyongdae funfair”, *KCNA*, 09.05.2012.

³⁶ See [here](#).

³⁷ The project was for example mentioned prominently in the Prime Minister’s report at the annual parliamentary session in April 2015. “SPA Session Reviews Cabinet Work Last Year and Advances Its Tasks for This Year “, *KCNA*.

³⁸ Jung-En Woo (1991): *Race to the Swift: State and Finance in Korean Industrialization*, New York: Columbia University Press

³⁹ Rudiger Frank: “The Kaesong Closure: Punishment or Shot in the Foot?”, *38North*, 12.02.2016.

⁴⁰ Hyung-Jin Kim: “Ex-N. Korea army head, who Seoul said was executed, is alive”, *Associated Press*, 10.05.2016.