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Evaluation and Analysis on Kim Jong-un's Public Activities in the First Half of 2020

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During the first half of 2020, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un attended a total of 19 public activities. This is the lowest number of public activities attended since his coming to power. Also, compared to before, the percentage of military activities (10 activities, 52.6%) compose a much greater portion of his overall public activities in the first half of 2020 while economic activities (2 activities) compose a much smaller portion. Activities regarding foreign affairs like diplomacy and South Korean affairs have vitalized since 2018, but they completely stalled in 2020. The concerns of COVID-19 seem to be the single greatest factor behind such phenomena. Intensive observations of military drills and inspections of military units in March and April may have been in line with winter training and expressions of discontent toward South Korea. Unless the threat of COVID-19 dissipates, the second half of 2020 will also see Kim Jong-un's attendance in public activities largely limited.

Lowest Since Coming to Power...More than Half of Activities in the Military

According to the reports from the North Korean media, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un attended a total of 19 public activities in the first half of 2020, starting with his January 2nd visit to the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun. This number does

not include his sending or receiving letters to and from foreign leaders such as South Korean President Moon Jae-in, U.S. President Donald Trump, or Chairman of the Central Military Commission in China Xi Jinping. <Table 1> breaks down Kim Jong-un's public activities in the first half of 2020 by areas.

<Table 1>

Breakdown of Kim Jong-un's Public Activities in the First Half of 2020 into Areas

Areas	Domestic				Foreign		Total
	Politics	Military	Economy	Society·Culture	South Korean Affairs	Diplomacy	
No. of Attendance	4	10	2	3	0	0	19
Percentage (%)	21.1	52.6	10.5	15.8	0	0	100

Kim Jong-un's public activities regarding politics include paying respects at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun (Jan 2), extended Politburo Meeting of the Central Committee of the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK) (Feb 29), Politburo Meeting of the Central Committee of the WPK (Apr 12), and the 13th Politburo Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK (Jun 8). There were only two public activities related to the economy: the field guidance at the construction site for Sunchon Phosphate Fertilizer Factory (Jan 7) and participation in the ground-breaking ceremony of this factory (May 1). Social and cultural activities were also limited to paying condolences at Hwang Sun-hui's funeral (Jan 18), attending the Lunar New Year's concert (Jan 26), attending and making a speech at the ground-breaking ceremony for the Pyongyang General Hospital (Mar 18).

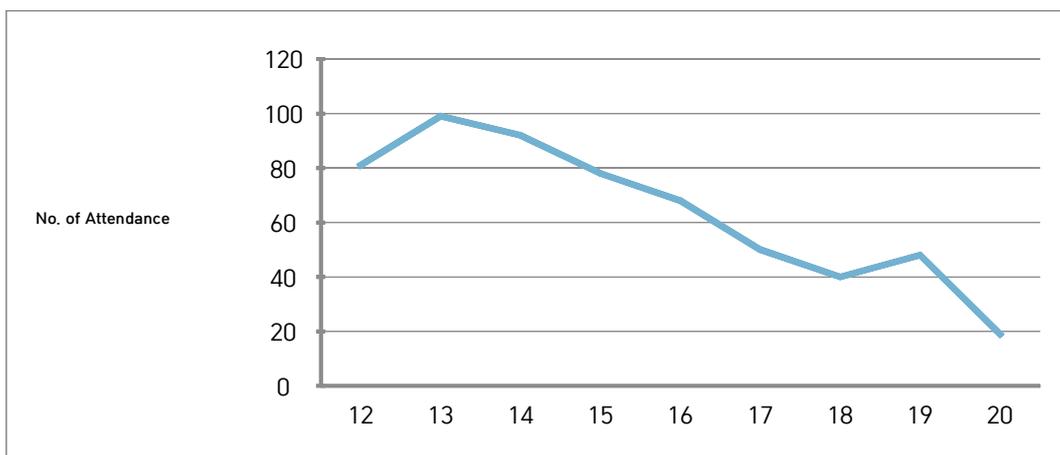
The largest portion (10 attendances) of Kim Jong-un's public activities was comprised of military activities. Eight of the ten attendances were for observing military drills or inspecting military units as follows: the guidance of the military joint strike drill (Feb 29), guidance of long-range artillery firepower strike drill (Mar

3, Mar 10), guidance of a firing competition among artillery units under the 7th and 9th Divisions (Mar 13), guidance of a firing competition among artillery units in the Western General Division (Divisions 3, 4, and 8) (Mar 21), observation of test-fires of tactical guided missiles (Mar 22), guidance of division-wise mortar firing drills (Apr 10), and inspection of the western front air defense unit (Apr 12). Two of the ten attendances were for guiding the Central Military Committee meetings such as the 4th extended Meeting of the 7th Central Military Committee of the WPK (May 24) and the 5th Preliminary Meeting of the 7th Central Military Committee of the WPK (Jun 24).

Kim Jong-un's public activities in the first half of 2020 show several characteristics. First, Kim Jong-un has attended the least number of activities since he came to power. According to the author's analysis based on North Korean media reports, Kim Jong-un's average attendances for the first half of the year at public activities from 2012 to 2020 are as shown in <Figure 1>. The number of attendances has peaked in 2013 and has been reducing ever since. Still, a decrease from an average of 40~50 to 18 in 2020 is an unprecedented transition.

<Figure 1>

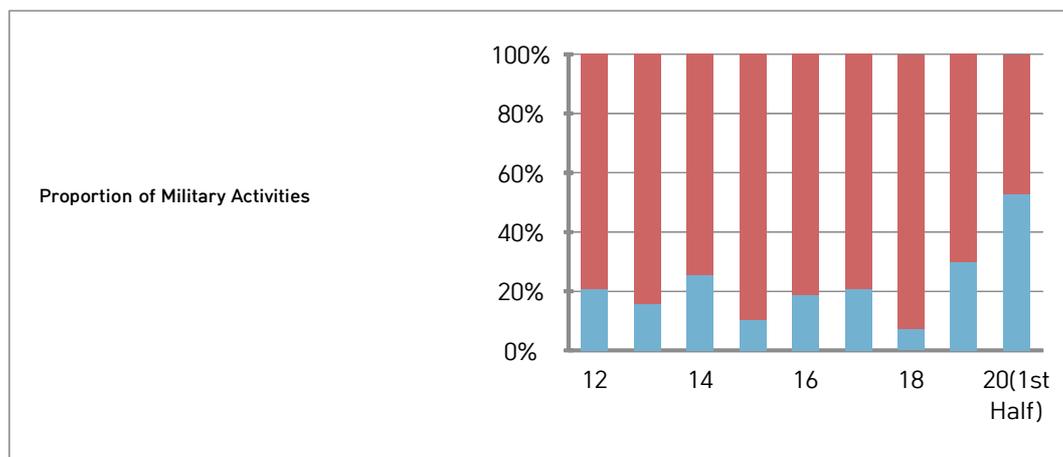
Kim Jong-un's Yearly Attendances at Public Activities during First Half Years



Second, military activities compose a much larger portion of public activity attendances. Since the phase of the so-called “Spring of Peace in the Korean Peninsula” has hit its stride, the proportion of military activities among Kim Jong-un’s public activities has only been 7% in 2018 and 21% in 2019. Of course, directly comparing the proportions from 2018 and 2019 with 2020 might be inadequate as the total number of public activities is unusually small in 2020. Nonetheless, as described in <Figure 2>, the year 2020 is distinctive as it marks the only year where military activities composed more than half of all public activities attended by Kim Jong-un ever since he came to power.

<Figure 2>

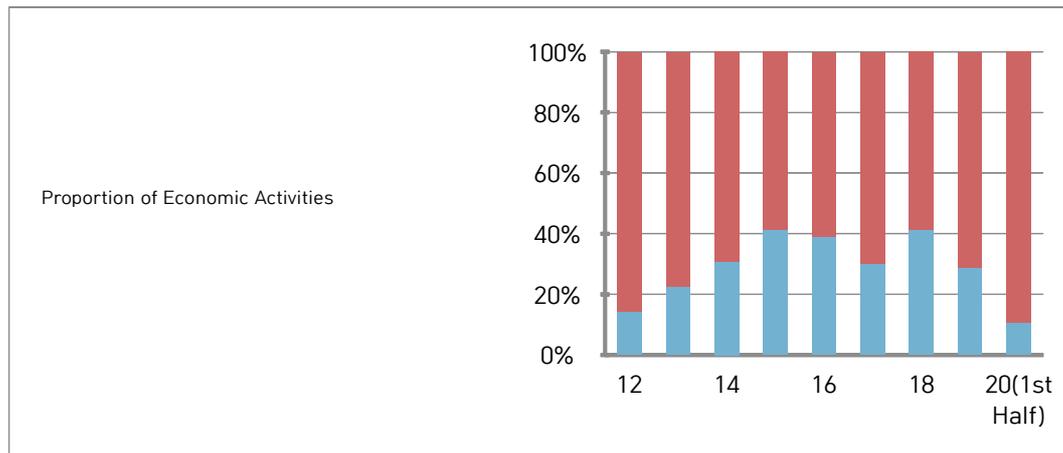
Changes in the Proportion of Public Military Activities Attended by Kim Jong-un Since 2012



Third, of all public attendance in the first half of 2020, economic activities compose an especially small portion. As portrayed in <Figure 3>, the proportion of economic activities attended by Kim Jong-un since his coming to power has sustained between 20 to 40%. Until 2019, 2012 marked the lowest attendance (12%) at economic activities; in the first half of 2020, the number was around 10% for the first time. Even if we include the attendance and speech at the ground-breaking ceremony for the Pyongyang General Hospital (March 18) as an economic activity, the proportion only increases to 15.8%.

<Figure 3>

Changes in the Proportion of Public Economic Activities Attended by Kim Jong-un Since 2012



Fourth, there's a complete lack of participation in foreign affairs activities such as South Korean affairs and diplomacy. Since his de facto termination of the *Byungjin* (parallel development) policy of economy and nuclear weapons in April of 2018, Kim Jong-un has actively participated in foreign affairs. He held two inter-Korean summits with South Korean President Moon Jae-in at the Panmunjom Peace House on April 27 and Panmunjom Unification Pavilion on May 26, three North Korea-China Summits with Chairman of China Xi Jinping in Beijing on March 25-26, Dalian on May 7-8, and Beijing on June 19-20, and the historic North Korea-U.S. Summit in Singapore with the U.S. President Trump on June 12. In the first half of 2019, Kim Jong-un visited China for the 5th time (Jan 7-10) accompanied by a North Korea-China Summit, welcomed Chairman Xi Jinping's visit to North Korea (Jun 20-21) accompanied by a North Korea-China Summit, held the second North Korea-U.S. Summit (Feb 27-28) and the North Korea-Vietnam Summit (Mar 1) in Hanoi, visited Vladivostok as his first visit to Russia (Apr 24-27) accompanied by a North Korea-Russia Summit, and held the trilateral meeting with South Korea and the U.S. at the Panmunjom Peace House (Jun 30). However, he attended no such public events in the first half of 2020.

Threat of COVID-19...Limited Optimism in the Latter Half of 2020

The biggest factor that affected Kim Jong-un's public activity attendance was, evidently, the global spread of COVID-19. The Kim Jong-un regime is known to have reported zero cases of coronavirus infections in North Korea to the World Health Organization (WHO). However, the poor healthcare infrastructure and system in North Korea makes it hard to believe the 'zero case' claim at face value. According to the images of Kim Jong-un's public activities reported in the North Korean media, it is hard to find Kim Jong-un and his core entourage—President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly Choi Ryong-hae, Vice Chairman of the State Affairs Commission Pak Pong-ju, Premier Kim Jae-ryong—wearing masks. However, this is only so in images reporting on Kim Jong-un's public activities. Aside from Kim Jong-un, images portraying Vice Chairman Pak Pong-ju and Premier Kim Jae-ryong's public activities and the public's participation show almost everyone wearing masks. Kim Jong-un's online participation at the 5th Preliminary Meeting of the 7th Central Military Committee of the WPK (Jun 24) also seems to be a precautionary measure against COVID-19.

As stated above, Kim Jong-un's reduced presence at public activities in the first half of 2020 is likely the result of the threat of COVID-19. Kim Jong-un's public activities require mobilizing a sizable crowd. He seems to be refraining from public activities because, if someone were to be infected, Kim Jong-un's own health might be at risk. The relative lack of economic activities and frequency of military activities as well as the increased focus on party meetings after mid-April can all be interpreted in the same manner. Military activities require relatively less mobilization compared to economic activities, and party meetings are held in limited sizes, leading him to focus more on military and party activities. The lack of foreign affairs activities such as South Korean affairs and diplomacy is also likely to be due not only to the stalemate in the Korean Peninsula but also the global spread of COVID-19.

Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un's seven, concentrated military drill observations and military base inspections from early March to mid-April need to be interpreted in the context of North Korea's forewarned "bull by the horn (frontal breakthrough)"

or the “new way.” Kim Jong-un could have aimed at bolstering the morale of the military and indirectly expressing his dissatisfaction with South Korea. Korean People’s Army is known to undertake its winter drills until mid-April when agricultural activities begin. In this context, Kim Jong-un’s weekly guidance at the two artillery firing drills in early March, inspection at the air defense unit in mid-April, and visits to the firing competition among artillery units under the 7th and 9th Divisions, the firing competition among artillery units in the Western General Division (Divisions 3, 4, and 8) and division-wise mortar firing drills (2nd Division) can be understood as expressions of dissatisfaction toward South Korea.

North Korean media’s March 22 report on Kim Jong-un’s observation of the tactical guided missile test-fire implies the combat arrangement of the tactical guided missile first presented in 2019. Considering the range of the missile, North Korea seems to be putting the blame on South Korea for the stalemate between the two Koreas and the situation in the Korean Peninsula since the fruitless halting of the second North Korea-U.S. Summit in February 2019. Though the interpretation may be consequentialist, Kim Jong-un’s disappearance in early and mid-June even led to the First Vice Director of the Central Committee of the WPK Kim Yo-jong’s hawkish speech against South Korea. Considering the uncertainties surrounding President Donald Trump’s reelection, North Korea might have chosen to act firmly against South Korea instead of restraining from actively interacting with the U.S.

Unless the global spread of COVID-19 ceases soon, Kim Jong-un’s domestic and foreign public activities will likely be limited in the second half of 2020. On domestic public activities, he will be cautious about attending economic activities as they require the mobilization of large crowds. Comparatively, inspections of military bases and observations of military drills may be more adequate activities to attend as troops reside within barracks. Also, he will continue to participate in meetings where a relatively small number of people are mobilized.

Regarding foreign affairs activities, Kim Jong-un does not seem likely to resume public activities regarding South Korean affairs and diplomacy in the midst of an unfavorable situation in the Korean Peninsula since the country has closed its borders in the land, seas, and air to block the inflow of COVID-19. While sending

hawkish messages through the First Vice Director of the Central Committee of the WPK Kim Yo-jong, North Korea has rejected South Korea's suggestion to send a special envoy for quarantine reasons, among others. In this context, Kim Jong-un will resume activities on South Korean affairs only when the North Korean authority has clear evidence of COVID-19 phasing away in South Korea. Furthermore, Kim Jong-un will only resume when he believes that South Korea is ready to implement the agreements made between himself and President Moon Jae-in, namely Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula of April 2018, Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018, and the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain of 2018.

Some in South Korea and the U.S. are optimistic about the prospect of third North Korea-U.S. summit before the presidential election takes place in the U.S. First Vice Director Kim Yo-jong premised such claims as "personal opinions" and argued that the third North Korea-U.S. summit will not happen in 2020. However, she left open the possibility saying, "We never know. No one can predict what may happen depending on Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un and President Trump's judgments and decisions." Also, as a condition for resuming North Korea-U.S. talks, she suggested that the U.S. withdraw the hostile policies against North Korea. With COVID-19 raging on in the U.S., and President Trump preoccupied with the upcoming election, it will be hard for the President Trump to change his stance in the short term. It also seems unlikely that Kim Jong-un will make a public move to hold the third North Korea-U.S. summit before the U.S. presidential election. ©KINU 2020

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