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Kim Jong-un's Inspection on Major Munition Factories

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Rodong Sinmun published articles on August 6 and on August 14 describing Kim Jong-un's inspection on major munition factories made August 3 to 5 and August 11 to 12 respectively. These two articles mean it is the third time North Korea has made the public known his visit to munition factories since he took power. When its leader visited munition plants, North Korea used to express them as "machine factories" or made such visit private. Since Kim became the successor of his father, the number of visits to munition factories, made public, is 53 times. What is striking about the latest visit is that it is the first time giving details about what weapons are being produced while specifying the facilities as "munition factories." In that sense, it is fair to say that not only was Kim's visit unusual but North Korea had a purpose of sending a clear message, internally and externally.

It appears that Kim Jong-un made an official tour to munition factories in the city of Kanggye, Jagang Province August 3 to 5 and did so in South Pyongan Province August 11 to 12. It is the third time Kim has thoroughly inspected such facilities in Kanggye, including the latest visit. Three separate visits by Kim, made in June 2013, June 2019, and August 2023, have something in common: He chose munition factories in Kanggye to signal North Korea's transition to tough policy, internally and externally. Put simply, it wants to send a message that it would visualize its hard stance and advance its nuclear and missile capabilities.

The two articles mentioned above have used the following expressions the most, such as "modernization" 16 times, "expanding production capability" 10 times, "war preparations" 10 times, "improving precision and quality" 10 times, and "series production" 5 times, in that order. The reports of the inspection by Kim were made to disseminate the message of "swiftly expanding the North's production," which literally means "ramping up its production capability" that will naturally lead to mass production.

Mass production of weapons have the following implications: first, North Korea has been pressured and nervous in the wake of the Washington Declaration made between the U.S. and South Korea; second, it hopes to strengthen its cooperation with China and Russia, blaming the U.S. and South Korea for worsening tensions on the Korean Peninsula and beyond; and third, North Korea desperately wants to put psychological strain on the U.S. and the South Korea. Against this backdrop, some of the weapons produced in munition factories are said to have enough specifications to be supplied to Russia, pointing to possible cooperation between North Korea and Russia.

The overall features found in a series of inspections can guide us to draw the implications for South Korea and the international community. Traditionally, public activities of the North Korea leader are made public through *Rodong Sinmun* and The Korean Central News Agency. The phrase “public activities” include the following: on-site inspection, troop inspection, in-person instruction on training and exercise, in-person guidance on various meetings, visiting a war cemetery, watching various sports games and performances, taking commemorative photos, granting an audience or having an interview, joining a banquet, awarding prizes with celebration, delivering a speech, test-driving, planting a commemorative tree, performing official activities regarding a funeral, condolence, and last parting. Such activities provide critical information that helps read the North Korean leader’s governance code, policy stance, internal/external message, and political trends. And there are private activities that have not been reported due to North Korea’s concerns over military security and over a possibility Kim Jong-un’s whereabouts can be exposed. Around 10–15% of his activities are estimated not to be made public.¹⁾

Unusual Disclosure on Inspection over Munition Factories and Three Rounds of Disclosure on the Inside of Arms Production Facilities

Until recently, the visits to munition factories by Kim have been confidential most of the time and even when they were made public, they were often described as non-military factories. There are two things in common when North Korea reports on places that deem munition factories. First, it does not provide clear information about the production status and what kinds of weapons reported factories manufacture.²⁾ North Korea prefers to display only limited amount of details and photos. Second, those responsible for managing munitions are included in the list of entourages and greeters. Officials from Machine-Building Industry Department, the Second Economic Commission, the Academy

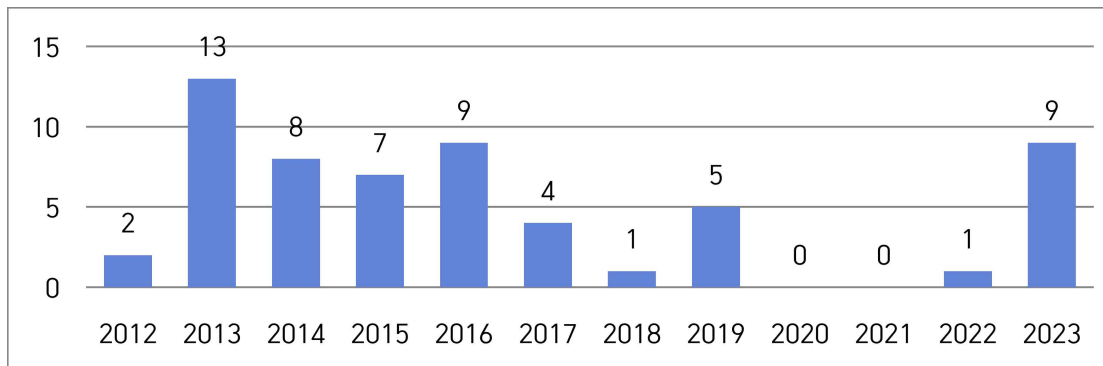
1) An article on inspecting major munition factories, published in *Rodong Sinmun*, August 8 2023, did not include Kim’s remarks during his visit on Nov 9, 2022 that “the achievement in a capacity-building project for the series production of multi rocket launchers deserves high praise,” but it is believed that a “confidential” visit to a manufacturing plant for multi rocket launchers on November 9, 2022 was made by Kim.

2) The way in which inspection on a munition factory is reported is in stark contrast with how stories of inspecting a non-military factory is reported: the latter usually includes the current status of production on each item and tasks in detail with photos providing visual information.

of National Defense Science, and the Military Command also perform their duty as entourages. The lists of entourages disclosed by North Korea allow us to identify, to some degree, the roles of a munition plant in question and whether arms being produced are common military supplies or critical weapon supplies.

Kim Jong-un has visited munition factories 53 times in terms of individual visit to such facilities since he took power.³⁾ Except three reports on Kim's inspections over nine plants, North Korea has not revealed that the leader visited munition factories 45 times. But in those cases, it is believed that Kim visited such plants.

<Figure 1> The number of Kim's visits to munition factories during his public activities



* KINU, Database on Kim Jong-un's public activities, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/nksdb>

In January 28, 2022, for the first time, *Rodong Sinmun* used the phrase “munition factories” as it reported Kim's inspection on those facilities. When the article said, “Kim Jong-un visited and inspected major arms factories” with five photos and the Korean Central News Agency showcased a relevant video, those two releases only succinctly described the munition factories as the “epitome” of modern national defense industry. They do not provide detailed information on what weapons are being produced in which factories.⁴⁾ In this sense, on August 8 and on August 14, 2023, North Korea for the first time reported Kim's visit to “munition factories” as well as what kinds of weapons were being produced in detail.

³⁾ Here is how the number of visits was counted: when Kim Jong-un visited multiple factories on different dates and combine each case into one to publish an article, such report or article does not constitute one visit; if one article includes visiting multiple factories, each plant is counted as one.

⁴⁾ It is estimated that Kim Jong-un visited munition factories located in Hamheung because he was wearing the same outfit while he was visiting the Yeonpo Greenhouse Farm located in South Hamgyong Province

<Table 1> Munition factories described in *Rodong Sinmun*

Reported date (visit date)	Places of public activities (factories)	Entourages
January 28, 2022	Major weapon systems (supposedly visited South Hamgyong Province)	Kim Yeo-jung, Kim Jung-sik, Cho Yong-won
August 6, 2023 (August 3-5)	Super-large multiple launch rocket system	Cho Yong-won, Kim Jae-ryong,
	Expansion construction of Kangdong Weak-current Apparatus Factory	Cho Chun-ryong, Kim Yeo-jung,
	Sniper rifles	Park Jung-chun, Kim Jung-sik,
	Strategic cruise missiles, unmanned attack vehicle engines	Hong Young-chil,
August 14, 2023 (August 11-12)	Large launcher trucks for strategic weapons	Kim Young-hak
	Tactical missiles	Cho Chun-ryong, Kim Jung-sik
	Launcher trucks for tactical missiles	
	(armored) Fighting vehicles	
Super-large multiple launch rocket systems		

Considering what has been mentioned in North Korea’s reports and photos describing the first August visit (August 3-5), the inspection is estimated to have taken place in Jagang Province, a representative arms production area. The inside of the factories are similar to that of the previous photos depicting Kim’s inspection on factories in Kanggye region. The factories released this time are as follows: Kanggye General Tractor Plant (Plant 26, rocket, missile, multi rocket launcher, and torpedo), Kanggye Precision Machinery Plant (Plant 93, ammunition, surface-to-surface/surface-to-air/air-to-surface missile, ammunition, multi launch rocket, mine, and torpedo), Jangjagang Machine Tool Plant (anti-aircraft artillery automatic launcher), Amrokgang Tire Factory (missile launcher tire), 2.8 General Machine Plant (Plant 65, pistol, automatic rifle, anti-aircraft gun, and rocket launcher)

Munition factories visited by Kim August 11-12 are designed for various missiles production, including tactical missiles and launcher trucks: under the leadership of the Fourth Machine Industry Bureau, Taesung Machinery Plant (mid-to-long range missile), which is located in Nampo, South Pyeongan Province, 1.18 General Machine Plant (missile and tank parts), 1.25 Machine Factory (general missile factory) in Pyongyang, Sanum-dong missile research center (the end point of manufacturing long range missiles) are included. When it comes to (armored) fighting vehicles, under the leadership of the Second Machine Industry Bureau, there are 1.18 General Machine Plant (tank, fighting vehicle, and missile launch pad) in Kaechon, South Pyongan Province, and Jagang Seongan Steel Plant (Plant 81, missile launch pad). When it comes to super-large multiple launch rocket systems, there are Kanggye General Tractor Plant (122/240mm multi rocket launcher), Chungjin Munition and Machine Plant (122/240mm multi rocket launcher), Manpo Cement Plant (Plant 96, anti-aircraft rocket, multi rocket launcher), and Plant 67 (shell and missile) in Seongchun, South Pyongan Province. Tracking where Kim Jong-un went for two days, it is assumed that he made a visit to factories located in South Pyongan Province.⁵⁾

Visit to Munition Factories in Kanggye Signals a Tough Stance with Heightened Nuclear/Missile Threat

Kim Jong-un's inspections on arms factories in Kanggye area have been made public three times, including the latest visit, since he took power (June 2013, June 2019, and August 3-5, 2023). These visits have something in common: when North Korea wants to transition to hard stance, Kim visits munition factories to send a critical message, internally and externally, of the policy shift. The three inspections followed important events: the June 2013 visit took place when North Korea declared dual policy of nuclear and economic development and enacted law regarding its status as a nuclear state following the third nuclear test; the June 2019 visit took place when North Korea resumed its missile test after the breakdown of the 2019 North Korea-United States Hanoi Summit; the August 2023 visit took place as North Korea tries to display "overwhelming attack" stance while pursuing a close bilateral relationship with Russia and with China, a situation that could be interpreted as a response to the extended deterrence strengthened after the Washington Declaration made between the U.S. and South Korea in April and to the trilateral security cooperation among the U.S., South Korea, and Japan.

These three visits were to visualize North Korea's tough policy transition in advancing its nuclear and missile development: the first visit occurred as North Korea strove to visualize its defense technology modernization plan (nuclear and missile advancement plan); the second visit occurred when North Korea started to develop in earnest tactical nuclear-mounted missiles in the wake of the breakdown of the North Korea-United States Summit; the third occurred as North Korea, in response to the U.S.-South Korea extended deterrence, started to push for arms sales to Russia and to come up with better operation plans with nuclear and missile weapons.

⁵⁾ Oh Gyeong-Seob, Cause and Current Status of Bloated Military Economy in North Korea, (KINU, 2018), p. 210~231.

Two Core Messages of Mass Production and war preparations, Response to the U.S.-South Korea alliance, and Groundwork for Arms Support to Russia

The most frequently used phrases in the news reports of the recent two inspections include “modernization” (16 times), “expanding production capability” (12 times), “war preparations” (10 times), “precision and quality improvement” (10 times), and “series production” (5 times), in that order. When “modernization” was used in an article, modernizing production process in arms manufacturing was repeatedly emphasized. For the modernization of production process, “precision and quality improvement,” and “series production” were emphasized. In terms of precision and quality, “precision production of weapons,” “scientific shell quality management,” and “best quality” of produced weapons were emphasize. It is unusual to describe weapons as “products” in North Korea. Serial production refers to the manufacture of a series of goods produced in an identical manner in order to boost mass production.

The latest two reports of Kim Jong-un’s visits have used “expanding production capability” 12 times. The phrase have been reiterated in various sentences: “production pace,” “improving production capability,” “enhancing production capability,” “passionately expanding production capability,” “ensuring productivity with robust mobility,” “dramatically increasing missile production capability,” “speedy development and production,” “expanding fighting vehicle production capability,” “exponentially increasing register multi rocket launcher production capability is desperately needed.” In a nutshell, one of the core messages of the two reports is to “rapidly expand production capability.” What North Korea wants to stubbornly emphasize in the two reports with such keywords as modernization, precision, and series production is that it must rapidly expand its capability to churn out manufactured goods of weapons, which is to say “the importance of mass production of weapons.”

North Korea has also presented “war preparations” as the reason why it has to increase its mass production capability. The phrase has been used 10 times and the emphasis on war preparedness can be interpreted as the groundwork for expanding its ties with other countries and weapon sales. There has not been any single moment North Korea has responded softly in the following important events that include advanced security cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea and among the U.S., South Korea, and Japan coming on the heels of the Washington Declaration between the U.S. and South Korea in April, close coordination with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the activation of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), the deployment of SSBN (Ship, Submersible, Ballistic, Nuclear), and the U.S.-South Korea warning

message to North Korea, even mentioning “the end of regime.” During the 7th Enlarged Meeting of the 8th Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) held in August 9, Kim Jong-un declared North Korea was in times of war preparation “with proactive mindset, rugged determination, and overwhelming capabilities,” leading to “absolutely perfect military preparation.”

In a similar vein, North Korean leader has ordered to pursue offensive “war preparations.” When it comes to war preparedness, what is different from the past is that Kim believes substantial plans for such purpose are critical, arguing North Korea needs to transition away from “war deterrence” to “impending war preparation.”⁶⁾ There are four strategic intents behind his newly emphasized policy stance. First, the shifted policy is the manifestation of North Korea’s anxiousness and pressure in a rapidly-changing environment where the U.S. and South Korea have improved the existing extended deterrence, the U.S.–South Korea Joint Military Exercise, and trilateral security cooperation among the U.S., South Korea, and Japan. Second, North Korea hopes to persuade China and Russia to rally around its efforts to strengthen the cooperation line with them respectively mainly by creating tensions and using the phrases such as “war on the horizon,” and “war preparations.” In response to the heightened cooperation among the U.S., South Korea, and Japan, North Korea believes it made a smart move to persuade both China and Russia that only working together can effectively lower the strategic pressure that these countries have felt due to the U.S.

Third, North Korea has been preparing for mass production to supply weapons to Russia in the name of war preparations. North Korea presented its goal of modernizing weapon

6) Following the Washington Declaration, Kim Yeo-jung made an official statement through the Korean Central News Agency on April 29 that North Korea is at a critical point where its responses corresponding to the new security environment must be made amid the activation of the NCG and the deployment of SSBN on the Korean Peninsula. Later, North Korean media started to highlight “war preparations.” The following phrases are clear evidence: “enhancing relevant activities for comprehensive and practical war deterrence,” (Official statement on strengthening self-defense made by Ri Pyong-chol, Vice-Chairman of the CMC, May 30, 2023), “a possibility of armed conflict or even nuclear war (announcement made by Kim Yeo-jung, July 17 2023),” “U.S.’s attempt to use nuclear weapon against Chosun may not a far-fetched scenario-its efforts are being organized, signaling the most serious situation,” “The odds of military conflict on the Korean Peninsula are higher than before, a condition allowing us to use nuclear weapons in times of emergency in accordance with the Nuclear Force Policy Act” (Statement made by Kang Sun-nam, Defense Minister of DPRK, July 20, 2023), “One of the major agenda items was what should be considered for war preparations” (The 7th Enlarged Meeting of the 8th CMC of the WPK, August 10, 2023)

production process during the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of WPK, held June 8 through 10, 2022, suggesting that the country had stated mass production policy at least a year ago. I would reason that not only has North Korea intended to deter South Korea and the U.S., it has focused on preparing for mass production—since last year—to smoothly supply weapons to Russia.⁷⁾ A series of events, in which Russia Defense Minister joined the military parade for the 70th anniversary of the armistice on July 27 and visited the Weaponry Exhibition 2023 escorted by Kim, and as recently as August 2023 reports of Kim’s inspection on munition factories, all point to one conclusion: North Korea’s mission to sell weapons to Russia has been undertaking in earnest. Ostensibly, it seems to only focus on war preparedness, but deep down, more practical focus is to make sure of smooth flows of weapons to Russia. Last but not least, North Korea believes offensive rhetoric and provocative activities targeting the U.S. and South Korea and the overt intention to ramp up its arms sales to Russia are effective tools to put pressure on the U.S. and South Korea psychologically. The fact that Kim’s visit to munition factories took place in the eve of Ulchi Freedom Shield and the trilateral summit among the U.S., South Korea, and Japan signifies a warning message from North Korea that it is uncomfortable with the trilateral cooperation that has been recently strengthened.

Weapons from Munition Factories Suitable for Russia’s Use

Although North Korea internally emphasizes the expansion of production capability, it has Russia in mind to ramp up arms sales to Russia. The reason the two respective reports of munition factories contain the description of super-large multi rocket launcher (MRL) is that Russia is now lacking multi rocket launcher (MRL). The fact that North Korea presented its production process modernization goal when it comes to MRL production during the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 8th term of the Central Committee of the WPK, held on June 11, 2022,

⁷⁾ The Office of Foreign Assets Control of the U.S. Treasury Department announced on August 16 it would impose sanctions on three organizations, located in Russia, on charge of mediating arms deals between North Korea and Russia. The Treasury Department made the statement that more than 20 different types of weapons and explosives had been traded between North Korea and Russia since March. A relevant article titled “The U.S. is on mission to root out three organizations involved in arms deals between North Korea and Russia”, Yeonhap News, Korea, August 17, 2023, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20230817002400071?section=orth-korea/all> (search date: 2023.8.17)

and that Kim Jong-un provided on-site inspection on a MRL Plant on November 9, 2022, which was not made public and ordered to improve series production capability means North Korea had been in the works to supply weapons to Russia at least for a year.

Second, the expansion construction of the Kangdong weak-current apparatus factory aims to mass produce shells and explosives and the North's primary focus is to supply weapons to Russia while showcasing it does not spare its efforts preparing for "war time." North Korea's media release of pistols and sniper rifles is a marketing point targeting Russia because it needs such arms in the ongoing battlefield as soon as possible. Although North Korea continues to hide one of their real and practical intents to increase arms sales by saying "producing arms suitable for the physical composition of North Korean soldiers and equipped with advanced combative performance," which will help to beautifully disguise such purpose as war preparations, the fact that the specifications of the recently manufactured weapons resemble those of western weapons implies North Korean weapons are ready to be sold to Russia.

Third, manufacturing plants for strategic cruise missiles and unmanned attack vehicle engines suggest that "Hwasal-1" and "Hwasal-2," strategic cruise missiles made public in the first half of this year, are beginning to be mass produced. Unmanned attack vehicle was finally made public in July during the Weaponry Exhibition 2023, and the military parade and Kim's recent visit mean North Korea wants such weapons to be deployed in active service as soon as possible through mass production. Those two weapons are necessary assets to Russia as it is in the middle of the war on the European continent. Strategic cruise missile is hard to be identified in a radar due to its low-altitude flight. Armed with stealthiness and precision, it can easily pass Ukraine's air defense network and perform the Black sea and land operations, an advantageous condition to exert power. The performance of unmanned attack vehicle (UAV) has not been verified, but judging from what we saw during the showcase of a UAV during the July military parade North Korea's weapon could be deployed in a battlefield without any delay.

Fourth, manufacturing plants for tactical missiles and launcher trucks aim to produce weapons to respond against the U.S. and the South Korea while providing war supplies to Russia. Launcher trucks shown in the latest articles of *Rodong Sinmun* are the vehicles that mounted KN-23, a North Korean version of Iskander, KN-24, a North Korean version of

ATACMS, and KN-25, a super-large MRL during the July military parade. These missiles have the range of 300–800km and depending on the location of the deployment, they could target not only the Korean Peninsula but the Japanese Archipelago. What does this mean? Russia could also use such weapons to target any area in Ukraine. North Korea may have recognized that the U.S. started to discuss supporting ATACMS to Ukraine after a stint of hesitation: its release of KN-24 during the military parade was not accidental.⁸⁾ Kim Jong-un also visited a plant which produces MRL (122/240mm) and North Korea is the only country in the world that can mass produce this type of MRL, raising the possibility of the country supplying such weapons to Russia.

Fifth, Kim Jong-un himself drove a fighting vehicle when he walked around a manufacturing plant for armored combat vehicles. Well aware of the fact that western countries, including the U.S. and the UK, have provided tanks and armored vehicles to Ukraine since the Russo-Ukraine war, North Korea is poised to engage in active “sales diplomacy” with Russia, which is not faring well in ground operation.

Sixth, a manufacturing plant for strategic missile launcher trucks was also made public to show the world that North Korea will mass produce such vehicles with robust mobility, aimed at threatening the US, and will strengthen ICBMs and mid-to-long range missile systems. In responding to the deployment of the U.S. SSBN, North Korea has released on purpose its goal of mass producing launcher trucks, suggesting an increase in its capability to produce such arms constitutes an increase its capability to attack the U.S. mainland. Put differently, the production of large launcher trucks is a critical national project to ramp up defense capabilities, which is again the essence of the deterring U.S., from the North Korean perspective. ©KINU 2023

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8) “The U.S. is reviewing support of ATACMS to Ukraine (missile with the range of 300 km), Hangeora, Korea, July 13, 2023, <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/international/europe/1099777.html> (search date: August 1, 2023)