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Analysis of Politburo Meeting of the Workers' Party of Korea and the 3rd Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly in North Korea

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North Korea held a politburo meeting of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK)'s Central Committee on April 11 and the 3rd Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) of the DPRK on April 12. What underlies the messages of the politburo meeting and the SPA this month is defensive 'maintenance of the situation.' This approach reflects a daunting situation, such as the possibility of a prolonged corona crisis, possible global economic downturn, the U.S. presidential election and uncertainty looming over the DPRK-U.S. negotiation, the continuation of sanctions imposed on North Korea, and internally, the dismal economic situation. The solution emphasized a response to ramifications of COVID-19, a reflection of reality in setting economic goals, strengthening of *Charkyok Kaengsaeng* (the spirit of self-reliance) and economic maintenance, and people's livelihood-centered adjustment for performance. Personnel reshuffling went through a marginal change where it was absolutely necessary. Overall, the agenda mostly focused on the management and resolution of the situation rather than a 'transformative decision' that accompanies a big change. The first half of this year was expected to be devoted to allocating resources for the 'management' strategy, which focuses on not raising internal and external risk in line with a delay, reduction, lowered-adjustment of strategic goals laid out at the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK.

Personnel reshuffling deserves our attention regarding foreign policy of the future. A newly established department for negotiations with the U.S. was presumed to have been created at the level of the functional bureau as a permanent body. This department would not just be confined to the Trump administration, but could have been established with a long-term view. First vice foreign minister Choi Sun Hee could play a role of directly leading this new department. The first vice-department director of Central Committee, Kim Yo Jong, who is involved in the DPRK-U.S. negotiations and inter-Korean relations, could have also been engaged in this line. It would be fair to estimate then that the 'Kim Jong Un-Kim Yo Jong-Choi Sun Hee' line constitutes an axis of foreign affairs with the U.S.

North Korea held the 3rd Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) of the DPRK on April 12 in the Mansudae Assembly Hall without the presence of Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission. Chairman Kim, however, presided over a politburo meeting of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK)'s Central Committee held on April 11. During the meeting, he adopted a joint resolution of the national level (the Central Committee of the WPK, the State Affairs Commission, and the cabinet) in response to new corona virus (COVID-19) situation, leading a discussion and decision of agendas that will be submitted to the Supreme People's Assembly. The meeting mostly emphasized "corona leadership" with strict top-class emergency anti-epidemic measures centering around Chairman Kim, which prioritizes the safety of residents. It also focused on demonstrating a sense of stability through the maintenance of patterns of party-oriented policy decisions, which take the form of hosting a politburo meeting of the party, followed by the approval of the SPA.

What underlies the messages of the politburo meeting and the SPA this month is defensive 'maintenance of the situation.' This approach reflects a daunting situation, such as the possibility of a prolonged corona crisis, possible global economic downturn, the U.S. presidential election and uncertainty looming over the DPRK-U.S. negotiation, the continuation of sanctions imposed on North Korea, and internally, the dismal economic situation. The solution emphasized a response to ramifications of COVID-19, a reflection of reality in setting economic goals, strengthening of *Charkyok Kaengsaeng* (the spirit of self-reliance) and economic maintenance, and people's livelihood-centered adjustment for performance. Personnel reshuffling went through a marginal change where it was absolutely necessary. Overall, the agenda mostly focused on the management and resolution of the situation rather than a 'transformative decision' that accompanies a big change. The first half of this year was expected to be devoted to allocating resources for the 'management' strategy, which focuses on not raising internal and external risk in line with a delay, reduction, lowered-adjustment of strategic goals laid out at the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK.

Bracing for 'Prolonged' Corona Phase with a Focus on Corona Leadership

The primary goal of a series of meetings held this time was to make it recognized at home and abroad that there are difficulties of implementing policy in the face of the possible 'prolonged' corona situation. The first reporting of the agenda at a politburo meeting revealed that the corona situation is "impossible to be resolved

in the short-term” thereby “having created a condition that hinders our advancement and struggle to some extent.” It is linked to the inevitability of the ‘adjustment·change’ of tasks laid out at the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK. The politburo meeting unusually adopted a joint resolution of the Central Committee of the WPK, the State Affairs Commission, and the cabinet citing “a more thorough national response to protect the lives and safety of our people in response to the global pandemic.” A joint resolution contained an adjustment of goals and tasks in the following four sectors: (1) a continued reinforcement of national emergency prevention projects, (2) economic construction, (3) construction projects for national defense capacity, and (4) stabilization of people’s livelihood.

Through the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee in the beginning of this year, North Korea set the tone of its agenda of the year, such as a wait and see approach towards U.S. domestic politics, leaving open the possibility of further negotiations with the U.S., a proper level of demonstrating strategic weapons, maintaining its cold-shoulder approach towards South Korea, and making some performance in marking the 75th anniversary of the party foundation amidst a spirit of self-reliance. All of those plans appear to focus on maintaining the status quo. However, an uninvited guest in the form of COVID-19 has made it hard to even maintain the status quo. It is not certain how strong messages toward the U.S. and South Korea would be effectively received amidst this global corona pandemic. It will rather more likely backfire, inviting blame or being ignored or reinforcing a negative image of North Korea. Even though the curve of the spread of corona has flattened in China, the border control is highly likely to be in place for a while. Economic activities will be inevitably shrunk due to a severance between the region and the city for the time being. Large-scale, state-led construction projects would face inevitable delays in their completion. The internal driving force of a “frontal breakthrough” is highly likely to be hit hard due to a dwindling fiscal situation of the state. The country as a whole is prone to direct and indirect ramifications from the global economic situation and the economic downturn in China that stem from COVID-19.

After all, the focal point of the governance boils down to the ‘corona leadership.’ The situation facing each country is directly related to its leadership and the state’s capability. That is why North Korea focused solely on measures demonstrating its leadership and the stability of state capacity in response to COVID-19, such as the hosting of an extended politburo meeting of the party and an array of decisions announced at the SPA (maintenance of strict top-class emergency anti-epidemic measures, adjustment of economic goals, emphasis on the

safety of residents, concentration on the construction of Pyongyang General Hospital, an increase in the public health budget, and the adoption of the Resource-Reuse Act and the Remote-Learning Education Act). The possibility of having corona-positive patients cannot be ruled out, regardless of its will for diagnosis and its diagnostic capacity, contrary to a governance-level reporting of zero confirmed case by the North Korean authorities, given its series of strong and extensive 'blockage' measures taken up to date, and measures on medical supervisors, isolation, and suspected patients. This politburo meeting and the SPA can be said to have its emphasis on the 'corona leadership' in an abridged form.

Adjustment·Change of Economic Goals: Adjustment of Priorities and Delay of Schedule

North Korea announced at the politburo meeting that it researched and discussed responsive measures for the 'adjustment and change' of policy tasks decided on the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK. Economic tasks revealed in the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK include the following: constructions in the Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist zone, Sunchon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory, Orangchon Power Station, and Tanchon Power Station; unified guidance on economic projects; improvement of economic management; establishment of 10 prospective goals; increase in agricultural output; improvement in science, education, and health care projects; protection of ecology and environment; and preventive measures for natural disasters.

What has been adjusted and changed can be presumed from the discussions of the SPA. The following was emphasized at the SPA: completion of construction of Sunchon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factor, guarantee of production in major steel facilities·steel manufacture facilities; construction of Pyongyang General Hospital; extension·remodeling of regional schools; prevention of electricity loss and guarantee of power generation facilities; increase in coal production; guarantee of transport demands; and seed improvement. In sum, the construction projects required of central-level efforts only include the Sunchon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factor, the Pyongyang General Hospital, and the construction of an oxygen separator at the Kim Chaek Iron and Steel Complex. The rest of the projects involve the improvement of facilities and partial reconstruction and maintenance of production at the provincial level. New construction at the provincial level or reconstruction or extension construction are highly likely to be adjusted considering the situation on the ground in the region. In short, the focus was on maintaining the status quo of the existing

production level.

In major planned construction, a priority of central government-level construction is highly likely to be adjusted, whose initial deadline of construction was October 10. The selected construction projects' deadline varies from April 15 to October 10. The Orangchon No. 3 Power Station, Tanchon Power Station, and the three-stages of construction in Samjiyon had set the completion date on October 10. The construction of Pyongyang General Hospital and oxygen separator at Kim Chaek Iron and Steel Complex was also planned. At the ground-breaking ceremony of Pyongyang General Hospital, Chairman Kim ordered to defer many construction projects planned for this year and prioritize the construction of the Pyongyang General Hospital. It is possible that this adjustment-change included deferring the completion date of some projects slated to be complete on October 10 or holding the projects. It is also possible that the completion of the Orangchon No.3 Power Station and the Tanchon Power Station had been put on the back burner against its initially planned completion date of October 10.

Chairman Kim conducted a field guidance for the first time this year at the Suncheon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory. On April 12, Kim Jae-ryong, the Premier of the Cabinet, made a field survey of the Suncheon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory. It was also announced at this SPA that the completion date is forthcoming. Given all those signals, the completion ceremony is expected to be held soon. The Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist zone was planned to be completed on April 15 but no follow-up reporting has come out after a news coverage indicating that the final stage of interior decoration and landscaping was underway. The completion ceremony was supposed to take place early April if things went according to schedule. It is possible that the Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist zone would be hit by a supply problem of raw materials and also had considered the timing and effects of the 'opening.' If 'opening' went ahead amidst the corona situation, it will barely yield not only the attention effects, but also practical benefits from tourism.

Another point to take a notice of, along with a realistic adjustment of this year's economic goals, is the stress placed on the economic management and a grip on the financial repercussions. That message was intended to strengthen the discipline on external trade and the use of resource development and reduce extravagance amidst the corona-induced economic downturn. The cabinet's pointing-out of 'fault' seems to be about a grip on the overall economic management. 10 prospective goals mentioned in the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK are highly likely to have been set in a direction that gives those goals enough time for preparation considering the corona emergency. It is

possible that North Korea would reveal to some extent a sort of ‘goals’ or ‘vision’ that would replace a five-year economic growth plan around October given that it stressed the development of an index system for the establishment of the prospective goals.

The DPRK-U.S. Negotiation Prospect Driven by ‘Choi Sun Hee-New Department for Negotiations with the U.S.’-line

Personnel reshuffling was only marginal, reflecting a change of the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK. What deserves primary attention is the change in the diplomatic line: Ri Son Gwon, the North Korean Foreign Minister’s appointment as a candidate member of the Politburo, set to fill up the vacancy as well as his appointment as a member of the State Affairs Commission; and the appointment of Kim Hyong Jun, the vice chairman of the International Department, as the member of the State Affairs Commission. Ri Yong-ho, Ri Su-yong, and No Kwang-chol, all of whom were involved in the DRPK-U.S. negotiations, were replaced by Ri Son-gwon, Kim Hyong Jun, and Kim Jong-gwan (Minister of People’s Armed Forces) respectively. Some view this reshuffling as an emergence of the Ri Son-gwon-led system, but this requires an understanding of the bigger picture: First vice foreign minister Choi Sun Hee and the status of the recently announced new department for negotiations with the U.S. The position of the first vice foreign minister Choi Sun Hee remained unscathed even in the midst of the dismissal of Ri Yong-ho and Ri Su-yong. First vice foreign minister Choi’s role and contribution appear to remain in place.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in North Korea consists largely of a regional bureau, functional bureau, and support bureau. The regional bureau takes up the regional diplomacy in countries, such as North America, Asia, Europe, and Africa. The functional bureau is in charge of specific diplomatic affairs or tasks that involve departments such as the International Organizations Department, Fatherland Unification Department, External Agitation Department, and Economic Department. A taskforce was established for a specific purpose when a need arose, including a task force on the DPRK-U.S. summit, six-party talks, and nuclear negotiations. Previous negotiations with the U.S. were mostly led by the Department of North American Affairs in the regional bureau. A newly established department for negotiations with the U.S. was presumed to have been created at the level of the functional bureau as a permanent body. It is possible that the previous task forces

could have been turned into this permanent organization. A new department for negotiations with the U.S. is likely to consist not only of departments within the Foreign Ministry, such as Department of North American Affairs, International Organizations Department, and Fatherland Unification Department, but also of government officials with specialties, such as the Organization and Guidance Department, Propaganda and Agitation Department, the United Front Department, International Department, Ministry of State Security, Ministry of People's Armed Forces, and other economic-related departments. The agendas on denuclearization and a peace regime are extensive in scope and each item on the agenda requires specialty. To that end, it is possible that North Korea might have created a permanent organization with the specific purpose of designating personnel to cover each item of the agenda, rather than assigning the combined works to the Department of North American Affairs.

Long-term Positioning of Kim Jong Un-Kim Yo Jong-choi Sun Hee

A new department for negotiations with the U.S. could have been created with a consideration of the prospect of DRPK-U.S. negotiations. This department would not just be confined to the Trump administration, but could have been established with a long-term view. Or the North could have announced the existence of this department to at least show their intention for continuing negotiations. First vice foreign minister Choi could play a role of directly leading this new department. The first vice-department director of Central Committee, Kim Yo Jong, who is involved in the DPRK-U.S. negotiations and inter-Korean relations, could have also been engaged in this line. It would be fair to estimate then that the 'Kim Jong Un-Kim Yo Jong-choi Sun Hee' line constitutes an axis of foreign affairs with the U.S. In addition, Choe Kang-il, the deputy director general for North American affairs at North Korea's Foreign Ministry, has been appointed as the new ambassador to Austria, which could be interpreted in line with the perspective of negotiations with the U.S. Ambassador Choe, an expert on DPRK-U.S. relations and denuclearization, has the advantage in terms of his contact with the headquarters of the IAEA located in Vienna as well as unofficial contact with the U.S. The creation of a department for negotiations with the U.S. was in a way a response to uncertainty looming over U.S. politics. Joe Biden was confirmed as the Democratic presidential nominee in the early stage of the campaign. The fact that Joe Biden has completely denounced the policy toward North Korea makes him an uncomfortable counterpart in the eyes of North Korea. By making it known the existence of this new department, North

Korea could have been sending a message of pursuing the continuity of negotiations with the U.S.

Foreign Minister Ri Son-gwon's role should be viewed in a different facet. North Korea may want to be portrayed as a strong nation by appointing hawkish Ri toward the U.S. as a foreign minister and to make their intent for negotiations obfuscated. It also has a meaning of rooting out the concerns of the military regarding the Foreign Ministry-led negotiations with the U.S. since 2018. The move could have been made in terms of control on the Foreign Ministry, personnel reform, and tightening of discipline as sanctions imposed on North Korea have strengthened and been prolonged, severely restricting economic activities abroad. A recent summoning of ambassadors in European countries and their replacement could be seen along that line. The appointment of Ri Son-gwon should not be construed as an emergence of the Ri Son-gwon-led system. Rather 'a system of Choi Sun Hee—a department for negotiations with the U.S.' or 'a system of Kim Jong Un-Kim Yo Jong-Choi Sun Hee—a department for negotiations with the U.S.' is highly likely to hold the power.

The appointment of diplomatic expert Kim Hyong Jun as the vice chairman of the International Department replacing Ri Su-yong could be interpreted as a move to strengthen the coordination with Russia and China on the UN stage. The appointment of Kim Jong-gwan as Minister of People's Armed Forces could be viewed at the level of the role of military administration in this current period. Kim Jong-gwan got swiftly promoted from the rank of lieutenant general on November, 2019 to the current rank of general. It could be evaluated that his contribution to the construction of tourist spots by mobilizing the military was recognized. It indicates that the construction role assigned to the military is a major task of the military administration. Choe Pu-il, born in 1944, was replaced by Kim Jong-ho as the Minister of People's Security, which is a natural course as Choe becomes old. Ri Man-gon, a former deputy director of the Organization and Guidance Department was dismissed on charges of corruption but was able to have his status in place as a member of the Politburo of the WPK for his significant contribution to strategic weapons development and capabilities at work. The appointment of Park Jung-chun, Chief of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army as a key politburo member of the ruling Workers' Party could be interpreted as a reflection of Chairman Kim's trust in him. Park Jung-chun accompanied Chairman Kim in his public activities 28 times in 2019. What is noticeable is that he accompanied Chairman Kim not only in the events of the military economic sector, normally reserved for the first director of the General Political Bureau in the North Korean Army, but also in construction and operation events. Chairman Kim's trust in him could be in line with a series

of military strategies of reforming the aged conventional force to an artillery-oriented force and developing weapons as well as be attributed to his capabilities at work. ©KINU 2020

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