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Analysis of the 4th Expanded Meeting of the Workers' Party's 7th Central Military Commission

Hong, Min

(Director, North Korean Research Division)

North Korea held the 4th expanded meeting of the Workers' Party's 7th Central Military Commission. This meeting showed a reaffirmation of the basic line of 'continuity of new strategic weapons development' unveiled in the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK of last year. It also emphasized the need for organizing new units. Certain messages intended to be sent to the U.S. and South Korea were also identified with the use of expressions such as 'nuclear war deterrence,' 'strategic force,' and 'threatening external power.' It also mentioned the need for correcting the bias of military's political activities found in the military domain and reforming irrational organizations and regimentation. It is possible that North Korea may have seen some problems occurring from the party's control over the military and the party's committee in the military sector or could have intentionally discovered shortcomings. Irrational organizations and regimentation shortcomings appeared to address the issues of imbalance and command among 'forces' such as military organizations, security organizations, and paramilitary organizations.

What is especially noticeable in this meeting is that this time members of the Executive Committee of the Korean People's Army Committee of the WPK participated, whose presence had been absent since 2018, and that Politburo members at the rank of the army corps and military units were included. 'The Executive Committee of the Korean People's Army Committee of the WPK' refers to the General Political Bureau. 'Politburo members' are in charge of political projects as a party representative dispatched to each rank of the army corps and military units. Therefore, it can be assumed that political-ideological control over the military and the military party committee activities were important agendas of this extended meeting. Issues raised at the expanded meeting of the Workers' Party's Central Military Commission held on December 20, 2019 again came to the surface.

Overall, those measures could be viewed as an intention to strengthen discipline through organization reform and crackdown on military's political activities while reinforcing the position of 'those in favor of strategic weapons development' and boosting the morals of the military via the promotion of ranks. This could be evaluated as a way of temporarily taking a step back for those in favor of negotiation with the U.S. amidst the 'wait and see' approach leaving open a room for negotiation resumption with the U.S., of strengthening the position of those in favor of strategic weapons development, and of disciplining the military. Considering the current situation, North Korea's card for the display of strategic weapons could be used in a highly limited way. A more probable scenario would be the announcement of the additional development of (ballistic and cruise) short-range weapons, display of an antiaircraft missile system, and display of the development process of submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

On May 24, Rodong Sinmun reported on the hosting of the 4th expanded meeting of the Workers' Party's 7th Central Military Commission presided by Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. As usual, the date and place of the meeting was not revealed. According to the report, three items on the agenda were discussed at the meeting. First, the meeting discussed how to come up with measures to analyze and improve issues stemmed from military's political activities in the military sector. Second, it reviewed and made corrections on some of the shortcomings found among organizations and regimentation in the military sector. Third, it discussed the need to strengthen self-defense power and complete the military deterrence capability by organizing new units. Chairman Kim signed the seven directives discussed and decided at the meeting. Those directives include 'new military measures,' restructuring of important military training organizations, restructuring of the military command system in security-related institutions, and promotion of ranks of personnel.

Strategic Balance and Tension between Negotiations with the U.S. and Strategic Weapons Development

This meeting ostensibly seemed to send two messages. First is a reaffirmation of the basic line of 'continuity of new strategic weapons development' unveiled in the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK. It also stressed the need to formulate new units in line with the new weapons system. Certain messages intended to be sent to the U.S. and South Korea were also identified with the use of expressions such as 'nuclear war deterrence,' 'strategic force,' and 'threatening external power.' Second is the need for correcting the bias of military's political activities found in the military domain and reforming irrational organizations. It is possible that North Korea may have seen some problems occurring from the party's control over the military and the party's committee in the military sector or could have intentionally discovered shortcomings. Irrational organizations and regimentation shortcomings appeared to refer to the issues of imbalance and command among 'forces' such as military organizations, security organizations, and paramilitary organizations. However, it is important to grasp a sense of what lies behind that ostensive message.

In sum, it is possible that to some extent tensions have been formulated on the standing among major organizations and elites over negotiations with the U.S. and denuclearization and that those tensions could be politically used. Chairman Kim has appeared to strike a balance between the so-called dove in favor of negotiation with the U.S. and those in favor of strategic weapons development and the military instead of taking sides with either one of them. However, it is still possible that he may make a certain strategic decision while being aware of the development of the situation at home and abroad. North Korea revealed that it had ‘established a department for negotiations with the U.S.’ in the midst of the basic line of ‘frontal breakthrough’ via the spirit of *Charkyok Kaengsaeng* (self-reliance) and ‘continuation of strategic weapons development.’ That could hint at North Korea’s intention to maintain a balance in response to external uncertainty expected to stay until the end of the U.S. presidential election at the end of 2020. This seems to be related to the strategic standing of related organizations rather than a power competition. This extended meeting should be interpreted along the lines between the possibility for negotiations with the U.S. and tensions in the form of the proper levels of strategic weapons development.

Main Agenda: Political-Ideological Control over the Military and Party’s Committee Activities within the Military

The core agenda of this meeting is “important military measures to significantly improve the overall armed forces in terms of political ideology and military technology and organizational and political measures.” The sequence of the discussion suggests that the primary interests were matters of reviewing and reforming internal issues (biases) of the force and of restructuring the organizations and regimentation. Trends of 10 Central Military Commission meetings since Kim Jong Un came into power indicate that discussions held after 2018 have been reported in relatively great detail. Except for the extended meeting on August 28, 2015 addressing the accident of the blast of North Korean mines (PMD series) in the South’s Demilitarized Zone and flood damages in Rason, participants were mentioned in detail in the 3rd expanded meeting of the Workers’ Party’s 7th Central Military Commission on December 22, 2019 and

the 4th expanded meeting of the Workers' Party's 7th Central Military Commission on May 24, 2020 involving the Political Bureau, General Political Bureau, General Staff Department, Ministry of People's Armed Forces, Ministry of People's Security, Ministry of State Security, and Supreme Guard Command. In addition, the size of the participants had significantly increased from roughly 80 people up until 2019 to 112 people in this 4th expanded meeting of the Workers' Party's 7th Central Military Commission.

The Date of Reporting the Extended Meeting	August 25, 2013, March 17, 2014, April 27, 2014, February 23, 2015	August 28, 2015.	May 18, 2018	December 22, 2019	May 24, 2020
Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Members of the Workers' Party's Central Military Commission •Members of the Executive Committee of the Korean People's Army Committee of the WPK •Politburo Members at the Rank of Army Corps and Military Units 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Members of the Workers' Party's Central Military Commission •Members of the Executive Committee of the Korean People's Army Committee of the WPK •General Political Bureau •Ministry of People's Armed Forces •The General Staff Department •The Rank of Army Corps and Military Units •Former Ministry of State Security •People's Security-related Organizations •The Workers' Party's Central Military Commission, the Cabinet, Executive Members in Charge of External Affairs •Provincial Party Chief Secretaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Members of the Workers' Party's Central Military Commission •Leaders of at the Rank of Army Corps and Military Units •Executive Members of Armed Forces-related Organizations •Executive Members of the Workers' Party's Central Military Commission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Members of the Workers' Party's Central Military Commission •Leaders at the Rank of Army Corps and Military Units •General Political Bureau •General Staff Department •Ministry of People's Armed Forces •Ministry of People's Security •Ministry of State Security •Supreme Guard Command •Commands of Armed Forces-related Organizations •Vice-department Directors of the Organization and Guidance Department of the WPK 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Members of the Workers' Party's Central Military Commission •Members of the Executive Committee of the Korean People's Army Committee of the WPK •Officers in Command at the Rank of Army Corps and Military Units and Politburo Members •Ministry of State Security •Ministry of People's Security •Supreme Guard Command •Commands of Armed Forces-related Organizations •Vice-department Directors of Major Departments of Central Committee of the WPK
Participant Scope	Roughly 80	Roughly 200	80	80	112

What is especially noticeable is that this time members of the Executive Committee of the Korean People's Army Committee of the WPK were again recalled and that Politburo members at the rank of the army corps and military units were included. Cabinet ministers also participated even though it was not an emergency extended meeting. 'The Executive Committee of the Korean People's Army Committee of the WPK' refers to the General Political Bureau. According to party protocols, the General Political Bureau, as an executive branch of the Korean People's Army Committee of the WPK, organizes/implements party's political projects of the military. It serves the essential functions of the party's control over the military. Furthermore, 'Politburo members' are in charge of political projects as a party representative dispatched to each rank of the army corps and military units and provide control and guidance to check whether additional projects are implemented in line with the party direction. It can be assumed that political-ideological control over the military and the military's party committee activities were important agendas of this extended meeting.

The participation of vice-department directors in major departments of the Central Committee of the WPK indicates that the discussion is highly likely to have involved the Military Department, the Organization and Guidance Department, Civil Defense Department, and the Machine-Building Industry Department, whose tasks are related to the party's control over the military. The Military Department is tasked with monitoring the party's projects over the military domain. The Civil Defense Department is in charge of the training of paramilitary units, such as Worker-Peasant Red Guards, the Young Red Guards, and the Paramilitary Training Unit. The Organization and Guidance Department has a sub-department tasked with providing party guidance over the military. Considering the functions of those organizations, it is highly likely that this meeting's main agenda was to point out the shortcomings in the party's control over the military and military's political activities. Some of the contents of the directives can be interpreted in line with this evaluation: the emphasis given on "strengthening party organizations and political institutions within the Korean People's Army and thoroughly exercising party-led monolithic guidance over the Korean People's Army with raised functions and roles"; and one of the directives, "measures to reform the organizations to enhance the responsibility and role of important military training institutions."

Provisional Retracting of Negotiation with the U.S.-faction and Reinforced Military Discipline with Strategic Weapons Development-faction Rising Up the Ranks

At the Politburo Meeting of the WPK on February 29, Ri Man-gon, a deputy director of the Organization and Guidance Department was dismissed on charges of engaging in non-party related act, privileges, bureaucracy, and corruption and exercising the authority. However, the expanded meeting of the Workers' Party's Central Military Commission held on December 20, 2019 also discussed the following issues: 'organizational and institutional measures to thoroughly realize and guarantee the party's monolithic guidance on the overall armed capability,' and 'issues to correct irrational organizations and biased shortcomings, and military issues and measures, such as a series of shortcomings identified in the military's political activities, a thorough compliance with the party's military line and direction, organization and extended reform of new units, and a change of affiliation of some units and a change of the dispatch of units.' It went further to mention "The supreme leader comrade pointed out some of the shortcoming and issues that urgently need to be addressed in recent projects of People's Army." After all, the agenda of this extended meeting is in line with a series of issues raised starting at the end of last year.

The decision that Ri Man-gon remains in his position as a member of the Politburo of the party was made to have him responsible for the party's organizational management as opposed to direct involvement. Ri Man-gon, as a deputy director of the Organization and Guidance Department, took the lead in the Kim Jong Un-era of strategic weapons development along with Ri Pyong-chol, Hong Yong Chil, and Hong Sung-mu. In that regard, it holds symbolic significance that Ri Pyong-chol, current director of the Machine-Building Industry Department, was selected as vice chairman of the Workers' Party's Central Military Commission. In fact, Kim Jong Un and then Chief of Staff of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army Ri Yong-ho were the two who got selected as vice chairmen of the Central Military Commission that was created through the National Meeting of the Workers' Party of Korea on September, 2010. That position remained empty and was reserved specifically for the

successor at the time, Chairman Kim Jon Un. The appointment of Ri Pyong-chol, director of Machine-Building Industry, to this position can be viewed as a strategic message designed to shine more light on the basic direction of the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of WPK, which is ‘continuous strategic weapons development.’ In fact, it can also be evaluated as measures associated with a change of strategic weapons-oriented military strategy and tactics and the formulation of organizations. The promotion of ranks of Pak Jong-chon, Chief of Staff of the General Staff of the Korean People’s Army, can also be considered to have been related to artillery-based weapons development to make up for the disadvantageous conventional weapons and restructuring of forces of North Korea.

‘Directives on new military counter measures’ discussed·decided at this meeting are highly likely to contain the following issues, already raised at the end of 2019 in the 3rd expanded meeting of the Workers’ Party’s 7th Central Military Commission: ‘issues to correct irrational organizations and biased shortcomings, and a series of shortcomings identified in the military’s political activities, a thorough compliance with the party’s military line and direction, extension and reform of new units, and a change of affiliation of some units and a change of dispatch of units.’ One of the directives, ‘reform of the military command system in a way that serves the purpose and duties of security organizations,’ could indicate measures to adjust the command system and strengthen the functions of the so-called ‘safety’ and ‘security’ such as Ministry of State Security, Ministry of People’s Security, Defense Security Command, and Supreme Guard Command. Overall, such measures could be viewed as an intention to strengthen discipline through organization reform and crackdown on military’s political activities while reinforcing the position of ‘those in favor of strategic weapons development’ and boosting the morals of the military via the promotion of ranks for 69 people. This could be viewed in light of managing the time of ‘waiting and seeing’ toward the U.S. in the midst of future external uncertainty. This could be evaluated as a way of temporarily taking a step back for those in favor of negotiation with the U.S. amidst the ‘wait and see’ approach leaving open a room for negotiation resumption with the U.S., of strengthening the position of those in favor of strategic weapons development, and of disciplining the military.

Shining a Renewed Light on Basic Direction of the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee and the Timing of ‘Strategic Weapons’ Announcement

After the 7th Party Congress of WPK in 2016, the Workers’ Party’s Central Military Commission discussed issues of the party’s monolithic guideline over the military and organizational-political measures in accordance with the decision of preceding party’s congress or plenary meeting. Therefore, new military decisions are not likely to come out at the Workers’ Party’s Central Military Commission that go beyond those of the party’s plenary meeting. Since this year’s overall direction was already presented at the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK, this meeting should also be interpreted within that line. After all, “the newly announced measures to strengthen nuclear war deterrence and operate strategic force in full gear” could be viewed as a ‘renewed light’ shone on the decision of ‘continuously developing (new) strategic weapons’ announced five month ago at the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK.

The emergence of new strategic weapons was hinted at the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK. This time a reaffirmation of such an emergence could be interpreted as an indication that North Korea could possibly display its own style of ‘strategic weapons’ at an appropriate time. However, the ‘effect’ and ‘timing’ must have been considered. The entire world, including the U.S., is going through the COVID-19 crisis and North Korea, too, is struggling both in terms of its prevention measures and economy. There also exists uncertainty looming over the U.S. presidential election. The conflict structure between the U.S. and China is becoming more acute as the U.S. started to deploy offensives toward China due to the corona virus. If North Korea becomes an issue, the U.S.’s approach to North Korea is likely to become hawkish and the U.S. could ramp up the pressure on China as well. It could complicate the U.S.-China conflict structure. Mistrust toward North Korea within the U.S. will abound even more. North Korea probably could not help but to feel out China because of its desire to normalize trade with China as soon as possible. Xi Jinping is highly likely to visit South Korea this year. If North Korea poses more of a threat with the display of strategic weapons, it will narrow the room for maneuvering between leaders of South Korea and China over issues of North Korea.

Therefore, the display of highly provocative strategic weapons could be a self-defeating tactic for North Korea in terms of timing and effect. U.S. Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden takes a very negative position on President Trump's policy on North Korea. North Korea recently announced the establishment of department for negotiations with the U.S., operating under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That could be seen as North Korea showing an intention to continue negotiations with the U.S. over the long term. Amidst uncertainty over who will be the next U.S. president, it is possible that North Korea would at least attempt to leave a room open for the resumption of negotiations. Considering this situation, North Korea's card for the display of strategic weapons could be used in a highly limited way. A more probable scenario would be the announcement of the additional development of (ballistic and cruise) short-range weapons, display of an anti-aircraft missile system, and display of the development process of submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

Period of Wait and See with Room for Negotiation with the U.S.

This meeting should be viewed in line with the overall trends that have been shown since 2019. A change of trends was spotted in the following events: the policy speech at the Supreme People's Assembly addressed by Chairman Kim Jong Un in 2019 (April 12), a break-down of the U.S.-North Korea working-level negotiations (October 5), dialogue offensive by North Korea at the end of the year, the Academy of National Defense Science's important test at North Korea's Sohae (West Sea) Satellite Launch Station (December 13), the 3rd expanded meeting of the Workers' Party's 7th Central Military (December 22), the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of WPK (December 28~31), and extended Politburo Meeting of Central Committee of WPK (February 29). One noticeable change was the retreat of those in favor of negotiation with the U.S. and the reemergence of those in favor of strategic weapons development. A fundamental approach to the U.S. raised the level of intensity to 'no denuclearization dialogue without withdrawal of hostile policy toward North Korea,' and 'continuation of strategic weapons development at the level of (nuclear) war deterrence.'

It is necessary to cross-check and contrast a series of events that occurred

in the process—establishment of a department for negotiations with the U.S., dialogue of a first vice-department director of the Central Committee Kim Yo Jong, and dismissal of Ri Man-gon, a deputy director of the Organization and Guidance Department—with some of the issues raised at this meeting—bias in military’s political activities, correcting irrational organizations, and boosting ‘nuclear war deterrence.’ In sum, it is possible that some level of tension could exit between major authorities and power elites over negotiations with the U.S. and denuclearization. A possibility remains that North Korea could maintain a period of strategic wait and see and leave open a room for negotiations with the U.S. while continuing the development level of new short-range missiles and SLBM to make up for outdated conventional weapons and strategic weakness after moving past the level of having fully committed to missile development with an increased range for modernization of defense technology since 2013. ©KINU 2020

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