



Online Series

2020. 8. 21. | CO 20-21

North Korea's Convening of the 8th Congress of WPK and Declaration of "New Path, Season 2"

Kim, Kap-Sik

(Research Fellow, Unification Policy Research Division)

North Korea, confronted with a triple whammy of international sanctions, COVID-19 pandemic and flooding, has selected "cards to turn the tide around," that is, convening of the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) and a new five-year plan for economic development. While having admitted its economic failure, North Korea took an offensive, not defensive, approach. It is highly likely that the so-called "New Path, Season 2" will be adopted at the 8th Congress. North Korea presented a "new path" focusing on self-rehabilitation; political, diplomatic and military guarantee; and control of the Party at the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK. Yet, amid uncertainties coming from the U.S. presidential election, it has maintained a "forced patience" against the "strategic patience" of the U.S. When the uncertainties of the presidential election will be cleared in many ways coming November, North Korea will likely attempt to decide more specifically on the new path. The keynote of the "New Path, Season 2" will probably be either of the far ends of the new path (that is, phased denuclearization or escalation of U.S.-North Korea tensions). In order to have denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula and inter-Korean cooperation be included in the policy combinations of the "New Path, Season 2," the South Korean government should display confidence in the peace process on the Korean Peninsula to both North Korea and international society.

At the 6th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), which was held on August 19, 2020, Kim Jong Un officially admitted shortcomings in national economic development, and the Central Committee decided to convene the 8th Congress of the WPK in January 2021.

North Korea implied economic hardships during the Political Bureau meeting last April. Kim stipulated that the COVID-19 pandemic was the “condition creating hurdles to our battle and advancement,” and he “adjusted and modified some policy tasks” determined at the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee. This is a downward adjustment of the initially set goals, as North Korea has encountered economic difficulties, including elongated border closures due to the unexpected outbreak of COVID-19.

Triple Economic Whammy: International Sanctions, COVID-19 Pandemic and Flooding

Even after lowering its goals, North Korea, battered by recent heavy rains and floods, does not seem to be able to achieve these goals. The WPK plenary meeting report assessed the general economic situation since the 7th Congress as follows: “the economy has not improved in the face of the severe internal and external situations and manifold unexpected challenges, thereby planned attainment of the goals for improving the national economy has been seriously delayed and the people’s living standards have not remarkably improved.” This represents a formal acknowledgement of economic failure. With this dismal report card on the economy in hand, North Korea was not able to praise good performance in celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the Foundation of the WPK. Apparently, the triple whammy of international sanctions, COVID-19 and floods has driven the North Korean economy into deeper distress.

What is noticeable, however, is that North Korea has taken an offensive, not defensive, approach in responding to this economic failure. It used the “cards to turn around the atmosphere,” that is, a decision to hold the 8th Congress and a new 5-year economic development plan. This is a contrast to the response Kim

Jong Un's predecessor, Kim Il-sung, made in 1993. At the 21st Plenary Meeting of the 6th Central Committee, held in December 1993, Kim Il-sung admitted the economic failure by stating that "important indexes predicted in the third 7-year plan could not be attained due to international circumstances and intense domestic political situations." As a countermeasure for the failure, he set the following two to three years as "a buffer period for building the socialist economy." In contrast, Kim Jong Un attempted to have a "breakthrough head-on," rather than setting a buffer period, and presented the new 5-year plan for national economic development.

Standardization of the Socialist Party State System and the Growth of the WPK

Article 21 of the Charter of the WPK in force states that the Party Central Committee shall announce the date on which a Party Congress will be held six months in advance. According to this provision, as the announcement was made on August 19, the 8th Party Congress should be held after February 19, 2021. As the next Party Congress is scheduled for January, it seems that either this provision has been deleted or the required period has been shortened.¹⁾ At the latest Plenary Meeting, Kim Jong Un specified guidelines as basic principles regarding the operation of the Party Congress, one of which is "to convene the Party Congress, the supreme guidance organization of the Party, on a regular basis." Accordingly, when revisions are made to the Charter at the 8th Party Congress, the cycle of convening the Congress is expected to be included. The Chinese Communist Party makes it a rule that the Party Congress is held every five years, and the Charter of the 6th Party Congress also stipulates the cycle for calling the Party Congress, but not a deadline for the announcement of convening the Congress. The five-year term looks highly possible. The Party Congress to be convened for the first time in five years and anticipated Charter revisions demonstrate that the political system in North Korea

1) The new year's address of Kim Jong Un for 2020 was replaced with the report of the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee. For 2021, the Congress of the WPK will be held in January 2021, and Kim Jong Un probably has much to consider regarding the new year's address.

is reaching the standard “socialist party state system” and has been solidified as such.

At the 6th Plenary Meeting, it was stated that “one delegate with the right to vote to the Congress will be appointed among every 1,300 Party members, and one delegate with the right to speak among every 1,300 candidate Party members,” presenting a clue to estimate the number of WPK members. Since the 6th Congress convened in 1980, North Korea has never revealed the number of Party members. The ratio of Party members to delegates of the 6th Congress was 1,000 to 1, and 3,062 delegates with the right to vote and 158 delegates with the right to speak participated in the Congress. This has been the basis for estimating the number of Party members at 3 million. At the 7th Congress, 3,467 delegates with the right to vote and 200 with the right to speak were present. When the ratio of 1,300 to 1 is applied, the number of Party members becomes over 4.5 million. Assumingly, the number of members has increased more than 50% over the last 40 years. As North Korea claims, unveiling the number of Party members “demonstrates the confidence the WPK has.” Also, at a time when “the U.S. targets the Chinese Communist Party and socialism and heightens pressure,”²⁾ North Korea publicly unveiled the “growth index for WPK” and may expect to indirectly control its regime internally and externally.

“New Path, Season 2” to be Presented at the 8th Congress

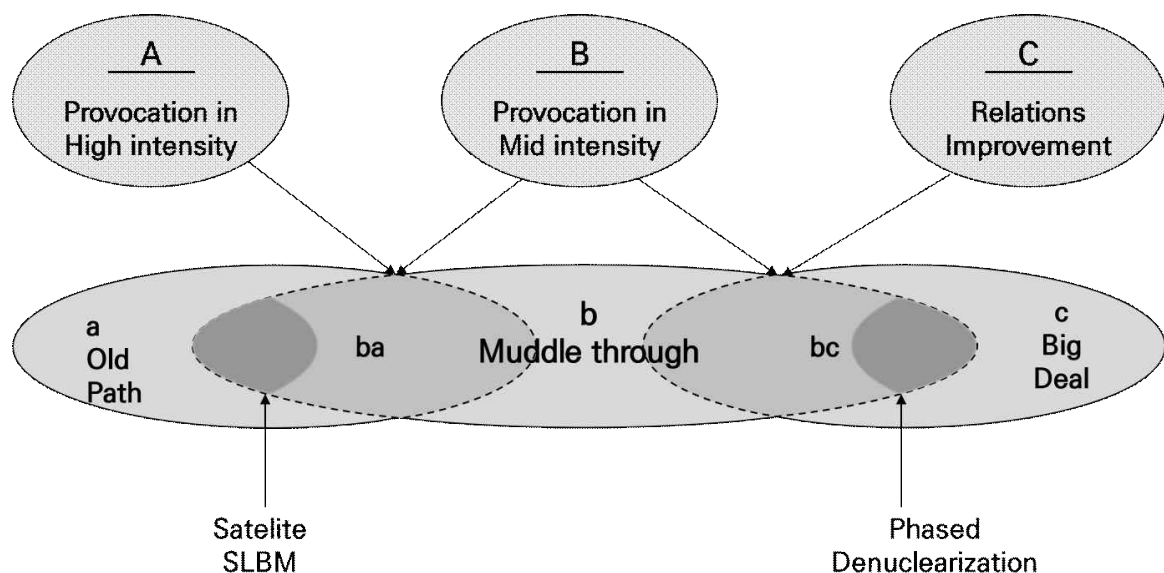
Regarding the Party Congress of North Korea, the parts which bear close attention are personnel rearrangement and “strategic tasks at a new stage of struggle before the Party and regime.” North Korea held the 5th Plenum of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK in December 2019, presenting a “New Path” comprised of several critical factors, including self-rehabilitation; political, military and diplomatic guarantee; and control by the Party. The North intends to enter into a “new stage of struggle” because of the breakdown of the Hanoi summit with the U.S. in February

2) *Rodong Sinmun*, July 2, 2020.

2019. The “subjective and objective environments faced with manifold challenges this year and geopolitical situations surrounding the Korean Peninsula,” as mentioned by Kim, require “setting forth strategic and tactical policies and guidelines for the times and revolutionary development.” In other words, time is ripe for introducing a “New Path, Season 2.”

What are the “challenges and geopolitical changes” unexpected in the “New Path, Season 1”? For starters, those challenges include the triple whammy mentioned above, its subsequent economic predicaments and a leadership crisis. They may include intensifying tensions between the U.S. and China and possible expansion of the bypassing of sanctions; increased uncertainties in the U.S. following its failure to respond to COVID-19; and South Korea’s independent stance, strengthened with the victory of the ruling party in the recent general elections and its successful K-Quarantine model. Although these variables cannot change the key factors of the new path, the “New Path, Season 2” is expected to “decide on the direction and countermeasures” by taking all these changing environments into account.

<Figure 1> The “New Path” of North Korea



Reference: Korea Institute for National Unification, “2020 Outlook for the Politics on the Korean Peninsula” (Seoul: KINU, 2020), p. 12 <Figure I –1> modified

What makes a “New Path, Season 2” distinct from Season 1 is the clearance of uncertainties. When uncertainties are cleared, the utility³⁾ of policy decisions can be calculated. The realistic category originally expected was B (muddle through). This means Trump’s “strategic patience” against Kim’s “forced patience.” This state includes both BA of high-intensity provocations without crossing the red line and BC of securing a drive for negotiation through U.S.–North Korea talks and South–North Korea dialogues. Due to uncertainties entailed by the US presidential election, the policy utility cannot be easily calculated, so North Korea has had to take a “new, undecided path.” Yet, these uncertainties would be cleared in many ways after this coming November, and North Korea will attempt to “decide” on more specific new path. The basic direction of the “New Path, Season 2” is likely to be either of the two ends of the new path, that is, phased denuclearization or intensified tensions between the U.S. and North Korea. This decision will stay for years to come and be very critical to the political circumstances on the Korean Peninsula.

North Korea does not have the luxury of having plenty of time before determining the “New Path, Season 2,” but it still has some time. The regime will celebrate the Party foundation in October and accelerate preparations for this year’s performance assessment and the 8th Party Congress from November. It has three to four months to prepare for that. The current circumstances make it tough to produce any visible results within this time frame. Both North Korea and the U.S. will be passive in having talks until the presidential election, and the inter-Korean relationship will probably stay stagnant until the end of the year. For North Korea, while uncertainties coming from the U.S. presidential election are cleared internally, it will spend this time frame conducting a final analysis on the varying combinations of variables, such as the U.S.–North Korean relations, U.S.–China relations,

3) In general, utility is a subjective preference of individuals toward goods and services. This is something that people feel about an object, thus utility of the same object varies depending on the individuals who use it.

inter-Korean relations and internal circumstances. Therefore, the South Korean government should continue expressing confidence in the peace process on the Korean Peninsula to North Korea and to international community, so that North Korea can include denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula and inter-Korean cooperation in its policy combinations. Above all, based on the three peace principles (zero tolerance for war, a mutual security guarantee, co-prosperity) upheld by the Moon Jae-in administration, it should take a proactive implementation of the existing inter-Korean agreements. ©KINU 2020

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).