

Analysis and Response to the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 8th Term of the Central Committee of the WPK

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North Korea recently held the 3rd plenary meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (hereafter '3rd plenary meeting') which conducted a mid-year review of North Korea's state projects implemented so far this year. The six items on the agenda were an evaluation of the accomplishments of the first half and the policy direction for the remaining year, food, prevention against the pandemic, analyzing and responding to trends in international relations, child care policy, and organizational issues. Two aspects particularly stand out when comprehensively assessing the outcomes of the 3rd plenary meeting that have been partially disclosed. On the domestic front, there was the continuation of 'discipline and rectification policies' with the intent to urge the achievement of production goals under challenging circumstances both at home and abroad and to maximize mobilization of the labor force. Internationally, the policy of 'observing the situation while preparing for both possibilities'—continuing to strengthen the military while leaving room for negotiations—was stressed. This will likely be the direction of North Korea's policies following the 3rd plenary meeting. But different from past such meetings, North Korea has not yet disclosed the major decisions of the 3rd plenary meeting including written-decisions nor has it publicly denounced either the U.S. or South Korea. This reflects the reality in which concerns of the North Korean leadership have intensified. Based on the disclosed outcomes from the 3rd plenary meeting, this study will analyze various issues regarding politics, the economy, society, and foreign affairs, as well as outline South Korea's response.

Emphasizing Kim Jong-un's Leadership and Continuing the Rectification Movement

The main keywords that were stressed through the political display associated with the schedule of the 3rd plenary meeting were 'Kim Jong-un's love of the people' and 'strengthening loyalty towards Kim Jong-un.' An emphasis was placed on the Party-wide resolve to achieve accomplishments during the latter half of the year under difficult circumstances centered around Kim Jong-un and the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in addition to the implementation of related projects. Stating that "the primary objective of the 3rd plenary meeting is to implement decisive measures that will quickly solve the pressing problems that the people of North Korea are currently interested in and desire the most," Kim Jong-un issued a special written-decision that "he personally signed with the sincere desire to contribute even slightly to the stabilization of the lives of the people of North Korea." He further issued a statement urging "all participants to implement the General Secretary's serious determination and commitment based on his sense of responsibility for the fate and lives of the people as well as the spirit of devoted service."¹⁾

Next was the continuation of the rectification movement. Generally assessing the organization, ideology, and activities of the Party during the first half of the year, Kim Jong-un, first, urged Party executives to "seriously and comprehensively reflect on their attitude and behavior regarding the Party with the guilt of failing to meet the expectations of all Party members and the people of North Korea" and, second, "individually pointed out how severe problems were already occurring amongst the projects and lives of Party organs." Third, he also stressed that "Party officials should devote all their efforts to earnestly implement their duties by sincerely learning from the limitations revealed during the first half of the year, while also remembering the principles of 'Serving the People is Serving the Heaven', single-minded unity, and self-determination that were proclaimed during the 8th Party Congress of the WPK through the 3rd plenary meeting" and, fourth, that they

1) "From the Third Day of the 3rd Plenary Meeting (June 17), *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)*, June 18, 2021.

“should become real revolutionaries that, like the revolutionaries of the previous generation, earnestly accept the decisions of the Central Party, thoroughly implement them, and throw their lives without hesitation to maintain the essence of the Party,” thereby ordering self-reflection and an innovative approach to the realization of projects.²⁾

Personnel Changes at the Political Bureau in the Areas of Ideology and Discipline and the Maximum Mobilization of the Labor Force

The main characteristics of organizational and personnel decisions from the 3rd plenary meeting are changes to the Political Bureau in the areas of ideological education and maintenance of discipline. North Korea announced that on June 18, on the final day of the plenary meeting, “members and alternate members of the Political Bureau, as well as members and alternate members of the Party Central Committee, were summoned and appointed, and that executives of government organs were either fired or appointed,” though the overall outcome of these personnel changes was not disclosed. Leaders of government organs are expected to be announced at future Supreme People’s Assemblies and other public events. Thae Hyong-chol, who was newly appointed as a member of the Political Bureau, was previously fired from his positions as the President of Kim Il-sung University and Minister of Higher Education at the Education Commission in early 2019, replaced by Choe Sang-gon at the time. His return is considered to be related to the ideological education of the younger generation, especially the new generation’s elite. Meanwhile, the appointment of U Sang-chol as an alternate member of the Political Bureau is thought to be related to the systemization of the ‘anti-socialist and counter-socialist’ projects overseen by the Central Public Prosecutors Office which he is the director of.

2) “From the Fourth Day of the 3rd Plenary Meeting (June 18), *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)*, June 19, 2021.

In addition, a policy initiative that was highlighted at the 3rd plenary meeting was preparations for, and achievement of goals, related to food shortages through the maximum mobilization of the labor force. First, North Korea adopted two written-decisions on this issue; one was “a written-decision that reflected additional issues that require a response in order to thoroughly achieve major state policies and projects ordered this year,” while the other was “a written-decision to unconditionally accomplish the goals set for the production of grains through concentrated efforts on agriculture by the entire Party, military, and the people.”³⁾ Second, ‘the issue of improving and enhancing child care policy’ was discussed, rather unusually, as an item on the agenda, and this appears to signal the utilization of the labor of females and housewives to achieve goals set for the latter half of the year. Third, the intent to achieve goals set for domestic affairs in the direction of ‘general mobilization of the people while strengthening discipline’ during the second half of this year by continuing nationwide preventive measures against the pandemic as well as anti-socialist and counter-socialist struggles. This reveals how Kim Jong-un appears to be anticipating generational rule over the next 20 to 30 years and is therefore concerned about the ideology and behavior of the younger generation in North Korea.

Maximum Effort to Minimize the Failure of Plans

As the main item on the agenda related to the economy, the 3rd plenary meeting evaluated the accomplishment of goals in every area of production, the improvement of productivity in agriculture, and the stabilization of the lives of the people of North Korea. Since the five-year national economic development plan for 2021 to 2025 was announced at the 8th Party Congress of the WPK, the North Korean regime has concentrated all its efforts on minimizing the failure of plans in every area of the people’s economy. This can be seen as the impact of the past five-year national

3) “From the Third Day of the 3rd Plenary Meeting (June 17), *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)*, June 18, 2021.

economic development plan for 2016 to 2020 failing drastically due to persistent sanctions on North Korea and the shock of COVID-19. Goals set in the areas of agriculture and construction have already been adjusted once during the plenary meeting held last February; it was noted that the goals for agriculture were set too high while the goals for construction were too low. In the past when long-term economic development plans have failed, the overall management of the people's economy was readjusted by installing a buffer period. But because the new five-year national economic development plan was announced right after the conclusion of the previous plan, it appears that the initial phases of implementation of the current five-year plan partially have the characteristics of the buffer period.

According to reports of the 3rd plenary meeting, North Korea has exceeded its target set for the industrial sector by 144% during the first half of the year, 125% compared to the same period from the previous year. While it is difficult to confirm the accomplishments in each individual industry, it appears likely that the rate of operation at factories has slightly improved this year compared to the previous year based on the fact that the production goals set during the 8th Party Congress of the WPK generally focused on achievability, and that the risks associated with COVID-19 are unlikely to have considerably worsened this year compared to last. But it is also difficult to only positively assess the productivity of the industrial sector because the import of capital goods has been suspended since 2017 due to sanctions on North Korea, and because the import of intermediate goods has been negatively impacted by border closures caused by COVID-19. If sanctions on North Korea and the health crisis persist, the inter-connectivity across industries will weaken which, in turn, will lead to failures of the general plans for the people's economy. Consistent encouragement and examination of the achievement of goals in each sector of production appear to be an effort to minimize these problems.

Emphasis on the Stabilization of the Lives of the People amidst Difficulty Procuring Food

A noteworthy aspect is the mention of the food situation. The 3rd plenary meeting directly acknowledged that the previous year's goals for food production were not met due to natural disasters and that the "food situation of the people is becoming concerning" as a result. Most of the grains exchanged on the market are from crops harvested last fall. According to estimates from South Korea's Rural Development Administration, grain production in North Korea in 2020 decreased by 5.2% compared to the previous year. This was precipitated by constraints on agricultural supplies such as fertilizers due to border restrictions coupled with damages caused by floods and typhoons.

Signs that the food situation has generally deteriorated began to emerge as the market price of corn began to relatively increase during the first quarter of this year, and the price of rice, which had remained relatively stable until May, started to rapidly increase recently as the spring austerity season during the second and third quarters began. In particular, an unstable situation has continued as market prices have increased despite the market currency rate remaining low ever since it dropped drastically last October. As a result, the market price of rice has increased rapidly from 0.5~0.6 dollars per kg to 0.9~1.4 dollars per kg.⁴⁾ Such sharp increases in market prices, including that of rice, were observed right after the strengthening of sanctions on North Korea and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. But if the rise in prices was precipitated by increasing stockpile demands due to psychological factors, this year's rise appears to be the result of a lack of supply. The possibility that interventions by the North Korean regime through the implementation of price restrictions and public distribution systems have reached its limits can also not be excluded.

4) For market prices in North Korea, the study referred to reports on prices at North Korean markets by *DailyNK* (June 8, 2020) and *Asia Press* (June 15, 2020).

North Korea appears to be concentrating its efforts on agricultural production by intensively importing fertilizer through maritime trade which was partially resumed this past March and April. But if commercial imports or humanitarian aid fails to arrive by the third quarter before the fall harvesting season begins, it appears likely that the price of food will remain at a high level. In particular, control of movement as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic may worsen the distribution of food which, in turn, increases the possibility that a humanitarian crisis will occur in certain areas and among certain social classes.

In addition to mentioning the food situation, the 3rd plenary meeting especially emphasized the stabilization of the lives of the people of North Korea. A special written-order that included policy measures necessary to stabilize the lives of the people was also adopted. While the specific details of the special written-order were not announced, it appears to be intended to improve the current situation in which the supply of consumer goods, including food, has generally worsened. As is well known, the North Korean economy is divided into two parts, the planned economy and the market, and the supply of consumer goods is mostly conducted through the latter mechanism. If the price of rice, which has remained relatively stable until now, becomes more volatile, then it might lead to the overall instability of market prices. The prices of groceries other than grain foods and imported consumer goods have already witnessed a sharp increase last year when border restrictions were strengthened.⁵⁾

To stabilize the lives of the people, there needs to be an increase in the supply of consumer goods through the state commercial network, the resumption of commercial trade, and stable economic activity by the people. But North Korea has been seen to respond to the overall instability of the market by physically controlling it. The trend of emphasizing the need for “anti-socialist and counter-socialist” struggles by defining the expansion of the market as “a temporary and transitional

5) Ji-Young Choi, “The North Korean Economy Assessed through Fluctuations in Market Prices and the Exchange Rate,” *KDI Review of the North Korean Economy* 23, No. 1 (January 2021), pp. 74-94 (in Korean).

system and order” in the mid- to late-1990s is similar to the situation in the late 2000s when the policy of suppressing the market was implemented following the first nuclear test in 2006.⁶⁾ The strengthening of preventive measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is also being used as justification for increased control of the market. However, the policy response of the North Korean regime is rather troublesome as it may precipitate greater uncertainty regarding transactions which may result in a sudden increase in market prices if market transactions are repressed without solving the general lack of supply of consumer goods including food.

Management of the Lives of People through the Dual Strategy of Enticement and Control

As for the main item on the agenda regarding society, North Korea mentioned improvements in the areas of education, health, and arts and literature while also displaying its firm resolve towards continuing the anti-socialist and counter-socialist struggles. As the extent of austerity measures and labor mobilization increases, North Korea has proposed a dual policy to prevent increased dissatisfaction among the people as well as the weakening of, and escape from, the system. On the one hand, North Korea expanded social welfare in areas such as education and health while also strengthening its propaganda and agitation projects through arts and literature. On the other hand, it also enhanced legal control over anti-socialist and counter-socialist trends, thereby implementing its dual strategy of enticement and control.

Next to consider are responses to the prolonged maintenance of emergency measures against COVID-19 and the urgency of guaranteeing the basic lives of the people. The 3rd plenary meeting, which emphasized domestic affairs, mostly discussed the crafting of policy responses to solve problems related to food, clothing,

6) “Not Exclusive Focus on the Economy but the Construction of a Strong Socialist North Korea,” *Choson Sinbo*, June 17, 2021.

and shelter or the basic necessities of life which have been harder to guarantee as the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic have been implemented for a long period. Kim Jong-un equated the extended implementation of emergency measures in response to the pandemic with the “lengthening of the struggle to generally maintain the economy and to provide the people with food, clothing, and shelter,” and ordered officials to meticulously prepare economic projects directly related to the lives of the people as nationwide preventive measures against the pandemic remain at the highest level. In particular, he ordered policy measures to increase productivity in the light industry and the fishing industry. The outcomes of the 3rd plenary meeting on issues related to society point to the need to put in place humanitarian measures.

Child Care Policy and the Mobilization of Female Labor

That child care policy was discussed as a major item on the agenda at the 3rd plenary meeting was unusual. This was discussed on the third day of the plenary meeting as Kim Jong-un stressed the importance of child care policy, stating that guaranteeing sufficient conditions for child care is “a policy of utmost importance and a long-standing goal for the Party and the state” even if the burden on the national budget is substantial. He further proposed specific measures by ordering the provision of milk and other nutritional foods to all children across the nation to be paid for by the state, stressing that a child’s period at nursery and kindergarten is the most important for their growth and development. In addition, he also ordered the improvement and strengthening of child care policy with special attention paid to feeding the children well at nurseries and kindergartens. This order normalizes the state-provided child care policy specified in the ‘Child Care Education Law of North Korea.’⁷⁾

7) North Korea’s child care policies are comprehensively specified in the ‘Child Care Education Law of North Korea.’ The law is based on the principle that the state and society raises all

But North Korea's policy of state-provided child care has existed as a mere formality during the 20 years since the Arduous March. As the amount of state support for child care facilities has decreased drastically, the number of parents enrolling their children at these facilities have sharply decreased, with mothers increasingly choosing to quit their jobs after marriage and childbirth and more families opting to care for their children at home rather than sending them to child care facilities. Moreover, parents were largely responsible for the cost of food, clothing, and shelter if they chose to send their children to a state child care facility. Then why was the normalization of the national child care policy, which significantly burdens the national budget, raised at this current juncture? The reason lies in the policy of maximizing the mobilization of the labor force mentioned above.

In its recent broadcast on June 17, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that approximately 13,700 female members recently were mobilized to work in the agricultural sector in the South Hwanghae Province, which is North Korea's largest area of food production. This was a provisional measure to increase the production of food even by relocating married females in large numbers to remedy the lack of supply of agricultural labor. But in order to send housewives, who are raising their children at home, to work, North Korean nurseries and kindergartens must be able to accept their children which, in turn, requires the regular provision of materials to these child care facilities. It is expected that policy efforts to resolve the overall problem of insufficient labor not only in the agricultural sector but across all industries by mobilizing the labor of married females will continue throughout the current five-year economic development plan period. It is also worth noting that enhancing child care policy is not only related to mobilization of the female workforce but also repression of the market since the return of females to the field of production has the effect of suppressing their participation in the market economy.

children at nurseries and kindergartens provided by the state and society (Article 2) and the principle that "the best is offered to children" (Article 12). The law further codifies the provision of food to children (Article 15) and the regular provision of milk, meat, eggs, fruits, vegetables, and processed foods such as candies to nurseries and kindergartens (Article 16).

Exploring Negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea

Regarding foreign affairs, North Korea reported that the third day of the 3rd plenary meeting “outlined the appropriate strategies and tactics as well as the direction of activities that will be applied to bilateral relations with the U.S” but has not yet announced detailed plans. However, Kim Jong-un’s statement was disclosed that “preparations need to be made for both dialogue and confrontation in order to defend North Korea’s dignity and secure our independent development and interests as well as to confidently achieve a peaceful environment and the security of the state.” This appears to be based on its ‘exploration of negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea’ that is currently ongoing.

The Biden administration, which defined the North Korean nuclear problem as a threat to American security, expressed its determination to solve the issue of denuclearization through a “calibrated, practical approach” based on the principles of “stern deterrence and diplomacy” after concluding its review of North Korea policy last April. Moreover, in the leaders’ joint statement following the bilateral summit on May 21, the U.S. and South Korea reiterated the ‘principle’ of denuclearization by stating that the two countries reaffirm their “common belief that diplomacy and dialogue, based on previous inter-Korean and U.S.-DPRK commitments such as the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration and Singapore Joint Statement, are essential to achieve the complete denuclearization and establishment of permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula” while also maintaining a flexible position intended to persuade North Korea back to the negotiation table.

It was anticipated that North Korea’s response and especially Kim Jong-un’s message to both the U.S. and South Korea would be revealed during the 3rd plenary meeting. But Kim Jong merely emphasized strategic flexibility in preparation for both dialogue and competition to “increase North Korea’s strategic status and voluntary role while also proactively cultivating a favorable external environment.” By using relatively moderate language, his response paralleled the Biden administration’s principle of ‘deterrence and diplomacy.’ In contrast to past statements, such as Kim

Jong-un's speech at the 8th Party Congress of the WPK which noted how "focus will be on defeating and dominating the primary enemy in the U.S.," the following statements indicate that North Korea does not intend to reject negotiations outright nor block the possibility of dialogue by making demands that are difficult for the Biden administration to accept: the statement by Choe Son-hee, the First Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, declared how "no exchanges or dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea will proceed unless the U.S. withdraws its hostile policy against North Korea;" the statement issued by the Director-General of the Department of U.S. Affairs of North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized President Biden's mention of policy towards North Korea in his address to Congress as "an outdated and archaic policy" that seeks to "continue America's hostile policy against North Korea" while also warning a "proportional response."

Dual Strategies and a Pro-China Approach within the Overall Strategy of Stabilizing the Situation

Based on the overall rhetoric on foreign policy from the 3rd plenary meeting, North Korea appears to have adopted their own version of a "wait and see" tactic by patiently waiting and observing the situation and trends, rather than taking the initiative and trying to determine the course of bilateral relations with the U.S. Meanwhile, it is inaccurate to interpret Kim Jong-un's statement from the 3rd plenary meeting as revising North Korea's approach to diplomacy vis-a-vis the U.S. decided at the 8th Party Congress of the WPK. Rather, it is part of a strategic and tactical response that reflects "the new U.S. administration's policy trends on North Korea" and applies the policy of 'responding to power with power and goodwill with goodwill.' The fact that Kim Jong-un emphasized how "the Party's policies and measures of strengthening the military should be vigorously implemented while a vigilant attitude in anticipation of contingencies should also be steadfastly maintained" at the 2nd expanded meeting of the 8th term of the Party Central Military Commission on June 11 confirms this view. Moreover, he also ordered that "North Korea must increase

its strategic status and voluntary role while also proactively cultivating a favorable external environment” on the third day of the 3rd plenary meeting. This appears to be based on the continuation of North Korea’s strategy to increase its bargaining leverage through the expansion of nuclear capabilities and strategic provocations, as well as its dual strategy of pursuing both dialogue and confrontation. Though North Korea moderated its language to not antagonize the U.S. too much, it is nevertheless applying ‘subtle pressure.’ In other words, it is implicitly demanding the U.S. to provide sufficient incentives for North Korea to return to the negotiation table.

Noteworthy is how Kim Jong-un declared that North Korea will “focus on steadily managing the situation on the Korean Peninsula.” This is an expression that China, rather than North Korea, has frequently chosen to use in the past. As if to respond to Kim Jong-un’s statement, the spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Zhao Lijian noted on June 18, the day after the third day of the plenary meeting, that “the situation on the Korean Peninsula is at a critical stage” in support of North Korea’s ‘subtle pressure’ approach, while also urging that “all parties must take the opportunity to alleviate tensions on the Korean Peninsula” and that “China will assume a constructive role in stabilizing affairs on the Korean Peninsula and facilitating the development of bilateral relations between the U.S. and North Korea.” This especially shows the likelihood of coordination or consultation between China and North Korea. There needs to be an analysis of whether North Korea’s relatively moderate stance is reflective of China’s strategic calculations intended to exhibit Beijing’s presence in the region and increase its influence with the U.S.

South Korea’s Response

The results from the 3rd plenary meeting showed that while the North Korean leadership seeks to maintain its planned economy, maximize mobilization of the labor force, and implement policies intended to strengthen ideology and control, it also seems to be aware that it is unable to return to either the Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong-il

era. As a result, North Korea has emphasized ‘new innovations,’ but it is unlikely that such progress will be achieved domestically. North Korea will likely both understand and be concerned about this fact. Therefore, international negotiations are crucial for the Kim Jong-un regime, and at the core of North Korea’s bargaining leverage lies its advanced strategic weapons system and its level of collective organizational cohesiveness. How will North Korea harmonize its domestic and foreign policies as it seeks to maximize its bargaining leverage while ‘riding the tiger’ in entering into international negotiations led by the U.S.? A multi-dimensional approach is required to deal with North Korea that has complex concerns.

As a result, first, messages conveyed to North Korea and diplomacy with Pyongyang are very important to persuade North Korea back to the negotiation table. An important visible issue is whether to consider suspending temporarily, postponing, or reducing the size of U.S.–South Korea joint military exercises scheduled for August.

Second, efforts need to be made to induce North Korea through the dispatch of a special envoy to North Korea or inter-Korean exchanges at the special envoy-level as well as coordination between the U.S. and South Korea related to joint military exercises in June. It is possible that the joint military exercises in August may not become a serious problem if affairs are managed well in June and July, which might then lead to new windows of opportunity regarding inter-Korean relations in September.

Third, ‘the size and timing’ of humanitarian aid to North Korea are crucial as it is important to persuade North Korea by proposing a larger package than in the past based on the actual needs of North Korea on items including vaccines as well as other goods, such as food and substitute foods that can be provided through humanitarian aid.

Fourth, from the perspective of managing its messaging campaign, the South Korean government should continue to convey its desire to pursue the development of, and cooperation with, North Korea through official and unofficial channels, even if North Korea refuses to respond.

Fifth, in the interest of preventing military provocations, the ‘project of directly meeting with anti-North Korean groups and activists to win their hearts and minds’ must be emphasized to control the anti-North Korean activities of these actors that are cited as justification for provocations by North Korea.

Sixth, there needs to be an increased cooperation with the South Korean National Assembly regarding the ratification of the Panmunjom Declaration, while ‘support of various activities’ must be increased to facilitate a nationwide conversation in South Korea.

Seventh, the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party as well as the 60th anniversaries of the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty and the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, all due in July, are events that need to be utilized. South Korea’s diplomacy towards China and Russia must be strengthened.

Lastly, networks and projects that have the opportunity to connect with North Korea must be prioritized in order to persuade North Korea through a multi-dimensional approach. Likewise, various considerations of unofficial projects must also be explored. Trilateral cooperation projects between South Korea, North Korea, and China may be revitalized through Chinese persons with key connections in North Korea. ©KINU 2021

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