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Three Points Worth Noting from the North Korea's 75th Founding Anniversary

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A series of celebrations marking North Korea's 75th founding anniversary (September 9) have taken place over the past few days. China sent a party and government delegation while Russia sent an army ensemble, showing off their friendly relations. At dawn on September 9, a paramilitary parade was staged at Kim Il Sung Square in the capital city of Pyongyang, led by the Worker-Peasant Red Guards, consisting of workers, farmers and intellectuals. Life-friendly camouflage weapons introduced at the parade garnered attention. On the day of the foundation, *Rodong Sinmun* covered congratulatory letters from Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Vietnamese General Secretary and President. In addition, celebratory performances were held throughout North Korea, boosting a festive atmosphere. Although this anniversary falls on a meaningful year because of the North Korea's view that any anniversary, which comes in 5, 10, or 15 years, is significant, celebrations were rather modest amid a slew of media reports speculating Kim will travel to Russia soon for a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Against this backdrop, this paper will shed light on three points that most draw attention from this anniversary.

Point One: Practicality Takes Precedence over Formality in China-North Korea and Russia-North Korea Relations

In commemoration of the 75th anniversary of North Korea's founding, China sent a party and government delegation led by Vice Premier Liu Guozhong. In 2018, Li Zhanshu, then Chairman of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress, visited North Korea as President Xi Jinping's special representative to celebrate North Korea's 70th founding

anniversary. This means that China sent a relatively low-profile delegation to Pyongyang this time. However, the message that the Chinese delegation delivered and the congratulatory letter that President Xi Jinping sent unequivocally expressed China's willingness to deepen cooperation with North Korea for the improvement of the people's livelihoods that North Korea is now desperately in need of.

According to the North Korean media, General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) Kim Jong-un said during his dialogue with the Chinese delegation, "Chinese comrades' participation in the celebrations of the North Korea's founding ceremony further shines our National Day event." Kim added, "I deeply felt that Comrade President Xi Jinping, and the Chinese party and government cherish the specificity of China-North Korea relations." The North Korean media reported that "the dialogue was full of comradeship." It added, "Both sides agreed to develop friendly cooperation and further revitalize partnership and joint projects in various fields to benefit the peoples of the two countries."

Both countries' inclination toward further deepening bilateral collaboration was once again confirmed in Xi Jinping's congratulatory letter to North Korea, which was covered by *Rodong Sinmun* on September 9. Xi said, "under the new international situation, China is willing to strengthen strategic communication and deepen practical cooperation with North Korea," and "to provide better welfare for the peoples of the two countries for the sake of peace, stability, development and prosperity in the region."

Economic cooperation between Beijing and Pyongyang is expected to ramp up, considering that Vice Premier Liu Guozhong, a Heilongjiang Province native and former Governor of Jilin Province, is an expert in the economy and administration, an amicable dialogue between Vice Premier and Kim, and Xi Jinping's message in his congratulatory letter. Bilateral trade between China and North Korea is expected to expand while the number of dispatched workers between the two countries and Chinese tourists visiting North Korea are poised to see a gradual increase.

Meanwhile, Russia sent only an army ensemble (Russian Army Academic Ensemble Alexandrov) and did not send a separate delegation this time. This is somewhat unusual given that Russian Federation Council Chairwoman Valentina Ivanovna Matviyenko visited North Korea five years ago on September 9 for the 70th anniversary of North Korea's foundation. Also, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu attended celebrations in Pyongyang on July 27 this year to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the armistice. However, Russia sending only a military song and dance ensemble to North Korea this time can be construed as a practical approach as both sides focus more on preparing for the upcoming Russia-North Korea summit. Therefore, their friendly relations between China and North Korea, and Russia and North Korea shown on September 9 clearly indicated that practicality takes precedence over formality, and that the three countries will forge even closer ties for years to come.

Point Two: Premier Kim Tok Hun's Power Remains Intact

On August 21, Kim Jong-un visited the flood-damaged Ansok tideland at the Tideland Reclamation Complex in South Pyongan Province. A poor drainage system caused an embankment to collapse, leading to seawater flooding over and wiping out most rice farms at this site. During his inspection, General Secretary Kim Jong-un severely rebuked “the Premier of the Cabinet over his feeble work manner and distorted viewpoint.” He said, “in recent years, the administrative and economic disciplines by Kim Tok Hun’s cabinet have been only getting disordered, and their irresponsible attitudes spoiled the nation’s economic plans.”

It was very unusual for the North Korea media to run an article blasting a highest-ranking official, directly mentioning his or her name. Upon this incident, speculation mounted that Premier Kim would soon be removed from his position or purged. However, even after Kim Jong-un’s harsh criticism of Premier Kim, it appears that he has not been replaced and continues to perform his duties. While it is true that Premier Kim’s work assignments and scope of responsibilities had been greatly curtailed, his status remains intact.

Starting with the September 9 event, Premier Kim Tok Hun’s public activities have dramatically increased. To start with, he met with Chinese party and government delegates who made a courtesy visit to North Korea and made a report at the national meeting for celebrating the 75th founding anniversary. In his report, he highly praised the decade of the Kim Jong-un regime. He said, “General Secretary Kim Jong-un’s leadership shattered the blockage of sanctions that threatened the country’s very existence, and bore the greatest fruit amid a harsh political and economic environment” and “ushered in a great era that put an end to the past when the U.S. unilaterally posed a nuclear threat.”

Kim Jong-un’s personnel management style has a fresh aspect this time. Premier Kim is a case in point. He was harshly slammed by the supreme leader just two weeks ago, but he was not immediately replaced or purged, and is now even leading the country’s important national event. With the 75th anniversary of the founding of North Korea just around the corner, it may have been burdensome for Kim Jong-un to replace a top-level official who had been leading the preparation of the event, or his reprimand of the premier might have just intended to give a wake-up call to other cabinet members to restore discipline. Whatever the reason, Cabinet Premier Kim Tok Hun’s power proved to remain intact as demonstrated during the September 9 celebrations. This also can mean that Kim Jong-un intended to show off his personnel managing tactics both internally and externally, with his own talent-centric approach.

Point Three: Kim Ju-ae Comes Closer to the People

Kim Ju-ae, who is called Kim Jong-un's "beloved child" by the North Korean media, is increasingly making conspicuous public appearances. When she made her debut at a Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile launch site in November 18, she looked more of a private person in a padded jacket walking hand-in-hand with her father. However, a few days later, when Kim Ju-ae appeared again on November 26 to take commemorative photos to celebrate the successful launch of the new ICBM Hwasong-17, she was dressed in a more formal attire and stood side by side with Kim Jong-un. At that time, Korean Central Television (KCTV) aired a scene in which Jang Chang-ha, President of the Academy of National Defense Science, and Kim Jong-sik, Deputy Director of the Munitions Industry Department of the WPK Central Committee, politely bowed to and shook hands with Kim Ju-ae.

In 2023, Kim Ju-ae began to make public appearances on more official and popular settings. She stood shoulder to shoulder with North Korea's top officials at a military parade to mark the 75th founding anniversary of the Korean People's Army (KPA) at Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang on February 8. She boasted her "special" status of the so-called "Paektusan bloodline," which constitutes a royal family, by taking bold actions such as touching Kim Jong-un's face or whispering to him. On the Navy Day on August 28, Kim Ju-ae visited the Navy Command with her father where she reviewed the honor guard of the KPA Navy, received a salute from the Navy Commander, and was briefed on operation plans alongside with Kim Jong-un.

Kim Ju-ae's appearance at the 75th anniversary of North Korea's founding (September 9) smacks of different characteristics compared to previous occasions. Until then, events where Kim Jong-un brought his daughter had one thing in common; they were all professional military-related events. Although the military parade on September 9 was intended to showcase civil defense forces led by the Worker-Peasant Red Guards, they are unmistakably general North Korean people, including workers, farmers, and intellectuals. Therefore, it is worth noting that Kim Ju-ae has come one step closer from the military to the general people on the occasion of the DPRK's founding anniversary on September 9. ©KINU 2023

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