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Analysis and Implications of the 9th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Ruling Workers' Party of Korea

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Strategy Towards South Korea: Transition from United Front Tactics to Separation and Conquest

The 9th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Ruling Workers' Party of Korea, held from December 26 to 30 for a total of five days, assessed that in relation to inter-Korean relations, "the relationship has completely solidified into hostile relations, not ethnic or homogenous relations, but relations between two hostile nations in a state of war." It further suggested that there should be a "fundamental shift in the principles and direction of the struggle with South Korea." In accordance with this perception of the situation, first, North Korea stated that it acknowledged the collapse of the previously proposed federalist unification, which was their official unification model and that it will completely scrap the model. North Korea states that it pursues federalist unification characterized by one ethnic group, one state, two systems, and two governments, but it implements united front tactics to realize North Korea-led unification by the people's democratic revolution (subversion of the ROK). However, this approach was deemed difficult to pursue, given strong opposition and the power disparity between South Korea and North Korea. Additionally, the contact process between North Korea and South Korea was seen as unhelpful in maintaining

the North Korean regime, particularly as North Korean residents were agitated (enactment of the Anti-reactionary Thought Law). Furthermore, North Korea expressed distrust and disappointment towards the “revolutionary forces” within South Korea.

Second, North Korea has declared the occupation of South Korean territory through military force, including nuclear capabilities. During the meeting, Kim, Jong-un emphasized the need to prepare for “strong military actions by our armed forces to subjugate the entire southern territories, while making it a fait accompli that a war could break out at any time because of moves by the enemies.” This is interpreted as a return to the so-called the theory of ‘Democratic Base’ and ‘Territorial Integrity,’ which were pursued in the early days of the Kim Il-sung era, indicating a shift towards a military reunification policy under the Kim, Jong-un regime.

Third, the mention of “reorganizing and restructuring the organizations responsible for inter-Korean affairs, including the Central Committee’s United Front Department,” as the results of the plenary session indicates a disruption in inter-Korean relations. The United Front Department has been responsible for overseeing inter-Korean dialogue, contact, and exchanges, along with operations for united front tactics. If these organizations are reorganized or abolished, North Korea’s future policies towards the South is likely to involve a shift towards tactics of pressure and suppression, seeking to forcibly control the situation, and pursuing policies of isolating and blocking inter-Korean relations.

Military Affairs

Mention of a Plan to Conquer South Korean Territories with Nuclear Capabilities

At the end of 2022, during the 6th Plenary Session of the 8th Central Committee, North Korea explicitly designated South Korea as a “clear enemy,” and emphasized the importance and necessity of tactically producing massive amounts of nuclear weapons targeting South Korea as well as an exponential increase in the number of nuclear warheads. The concept of ‘hostile actions’ was expanded to include the use of nuclear weapons against South Korea. In the recent plenary meeting, North Korea went even further, stating that if the US and South Korea instigate a conflict, they would transition

from “nuclear war deterrence” to taking military actions to “subjugate the entire southern territories.” This can be viewed as North Korea defining the inter-Korean relations as hostile, forgoing ‘one nation’ and ‘discussions for unification’, to secure the legitimacy of using nuclear weapons against South Korea and making the threat of military reunification more tangible.

A notable aspect of this plenary meeting is the emphasis on the possibility of war becoming a reality and the response to the nuclear threat. This is visible through their perception of the recent mention of the end of the regime by South Korea and the US, strengthening of extended deterrence following the Washington Declaration and the operation of Nuclear Consultative Group, launch of joint nuclear defense drills, deployment of strategic assets on a maximum scale, etc., as the possibility of war is becoming a reality and a nuclear crisis. It also mentioned the suspension of the September 19 military agreement and the move to expand the United Nations Command into a multinational war organization in details. These mentions can be seen as reflecting both a defensive measure against the pressure North Korea feels in reality and justification for the advancement of its nuclear capabilities. North Korea is likely to feel a considerable amount of pressure to the strengthening of ROK-US-Japan’s deterrence against them and view the situation seriously in terms of a war becoming a reality. At the same time, it used terms such as “keenly monitoring the security situation,” “sensitively manage,” “respond with the most overwhelming strategy,” and outlined “military measures to thoroughly safeguard national security.”

Specific mention of detailed tasks for the development of defense capabilities, with the purpose of showcasing advanced, irreversible nuclear weapons capabilities in consideration of the US Presidential Election

It is noteworthy that the detailed tasks for the development of defense capabilities to be carried out in 2024 were publicly disclosed during the plenary meeting, which is unusual. Specific tasks for eight sectors, namely the arms industry, nuclear weapons, missile development and production, space development, shipbuilding, unmanned aerial vehicle, detection and electronic warfare, and civil defense forces, were mentioned.

<Table 1> Specific Tasks for 2024 National Defense Capabilities Development

Task	Content	Intention	Anticipated Actions
Arms Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand the development and production of military equipment Secure the successful implementation of the Party's national defense development strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritization of arms production Demand for self-reliance in arms production Volume to supply to Russia Arms exports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modernization of major machinery factories
Nuclear Weapons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement the nuclear weapons production plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proliferation of nuclear matter and nuclear warhead 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nuclear matter extraction increase Possibility of nuclear testing Nuclear warhead production system
Missile Development and Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Present priority goals and achievements related to war preparedness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diversification of finished missile models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Solid-fuel intermediate range ballistic missile Improvement of the completeness of ICBM SLCM, SLBM Air-to-Ground, Air-to-Air
Space Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Launch additional 3 reconnaissance satellites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intention of highlighting its competitive edge considering South Korea's Development schedules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Considering Korea's schedule of the launch in April, the possibility of launching no. 2 in advance Possibility of Russia-North Korean technology cooperation

Shipbuilding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The 2nd Shipbuilding Revolution · Improvement of the Navy's surface and undersea operation capabilities · Swift execution of priority tasks with insufficient progress in a short period of time (primary objectives) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Begin the 10-year plan of navy modernization · Maximization of national defense development plan's achievement 	
Unmanned Aerial Vehicle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Develop and produce various unmanned aerial vehicles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Self-reliance in and exports of unmanned reconnaissance aerial vehicles, unmanned combat aerial vehicles, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Demonstration of flights using unmanned reconnaissance and combat aerial vehicles in ground, air, and sea with the intent to threaten · Possibility of supplying to Russia and the Middle East
Detection and Electronic Warfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Develop and produce various means of detection and electronic warfare 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Definition of EMP goals following tactical nuclear weapon deployment 	
Civil Defense Forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Fully prepare Worker-Peasant Red Guards for combat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Creation of tension in terms of war preparation, controlling and uniting residents 	

As for the defense industry sector, expansion of the development and production of military equipment was emphasized. Given the fact that this was mentioned first among the specific tasks and the emphasis on the importance of the successful execution of national defense development strategies, it appears that arms production is a priority task in the defense sector for this year. The emphasis on the

modernization of crucial machinery factories also suggests that they are considering an increase in military production. While this may contribute to enhancing North Korea's own military capabilities, it seems to be aimed not only at strengthening the country's military but also at factors such as supplying materials needed for Russia's Ukraine war and engaging in overseas arms exports, particularly to key countries in the Middle East.

Secondly, in the nuclear weapons sector, similar to the end-of-year plenary meeting in the previous year, there was an emphasis on increasing production in line with the 'exponential increase of tactical nuclear weapons and the number of nuclear warheads.' This mainly involves nuclear matter production and delivery systems (missiles). Given the recent reports of active operation of the reactors at the Yongbyon nuclear site, it is likely that North Korea will maximize the production of nuclear matter and accelerate the production of nuclear warheads accordingly. The explicit mention of the term 'nuclear weapons production plan' suggests an expansion of a systematic and planned production system. In the missile development and production sector, they mentioned priority goals and achievements related to war preparedness, indicating a continued effort to diversify finished missile models. Specifically, in 2024, the focus appears to be on the completion of solid-fuel intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM) and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) models, improvement of submarine-launched or sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), and air-to-ground or air-to-air missiles (as showcased in the Defense Development Exhibition 'Self-Defense-2021').

Thirdly, in the space development sector, North Korea set a goal to launch three additional reconnaissance satellites next year. The somewhat ambitious schedule of launching three satellites in a year seems to be aimed at showcasing North Korea's advancements in competition with South Korea, especially considering South Korea's plan to launch its second reconnaissance satellite in April. This schedule could be a demonstration of North Korea's intention to stay one step ahead in the competition. The acceleration of reconnaissance satellite development through Russia-North Korean technological collaboration is likely to be a significant focus in 2024. There

is a possibility that North Korea may launch its second satellite around April 2024, preceding South Korea, and launch the remaining two satellites before the US Presidential Election.

Fourthly, in the shipbuilding sector, North Korea introduced the concept of the “2nd Shipbuilding Industry Revolution,” aiming to enhance the Navy’s surface and undersea operation capabilities, addressing areas where progress has been insufficient in achieving the priority goals of defense development. It seems they will follow a two-track strategy. One involves a mid-to-long-term buildup of naval power, as outlined in the 10-year plan for navy modernization announced during the Navy Day last year. The other track involves visualizing weapons experiments related to underdeveloped areas mentioned in the 5-year plan for defense development in 2024. While the immediate visualization of nuclear submarines may be challenging, the adaptation of Romeo-class diesel-electric submarines, the development of intermediate-range SLBMs, or nuclear torpedoes seems feasible. As they emphasized the presentation of “tasks to be executed in a short period,” it is anticipated that these developments will become visible in the first half of 2024.

Fifthly, there was an emphasis on the development and production of unmanned aerial vehicles and equipment of electronic warfare. There is a possibility that they have considered self-reliance in and exports of unmanned reconnaissance aircraft and combat drones. Particularly, there is a high likelihood of visualizing threats against the to suspension of the September 19 military agreement through flights in the ground, air, and sea, utilizing unmanned reconnaissance aircraft and combat drones. Additionally, considering the increased global demand for war equipment in regions such as Russia and the Middle East, they might also be considering the possibility of exports.

Politics

Self-praise Regarding the Residents’ and the Youth’s Political Ideology and Mindset Improvement

North Korea expressed satisfaction with the positive changes in the organizational and ideological aspects of the party and the mindset of residents and the youth during the process of implementing the 5 constructive development directions for the party for a new era, presented by Kim, Jong-un in 2023. They highlighted political achievements such as stipulating the policy of bolstering and expanding its nuclear force in the Constitution in September 2023 and implementing measures for “democratic improvement” by allowing limited multiple candidates in the November elections for local people’s assemblies. After Kim, Jong-un emphasized the construction of a “socialist rule-of-law state that enables the defense of the system, policies, and the people” at the 8th Party Congress, there has been annual detailed refinement and specification of legal norms and regulations. In 2023 alone, more than 110 sectoral laws and regulations were newly enacted or revised, contributing to the systematization of laws and regulations and the reinforcement of social control.

Furthermore, confirmed once again in this plenary meeting is the establishment of North Korea’s pattern of party congress operation. Since the 8th Party Congress, North Korea asserted that “The party’s leadership style is presenting goals for a new stage of revolutionary development, systematically coordinating and setting timely measures through the party congress (held every five years),” North Korea continued to hold plenary meetings of the party in the first and second half of each year, maintaining the operation pattern of coordinating the overall government operation and presenting the future tasks. Moreover, in the 6th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee held at the end of 2022, a political bureau meeting was convened during the party’s plenary meeting for the first time to deliberate on the draft version of the written decision, supplementary amendments, budget reviews, and other matters. This practice was maintained in the recent plenary meeting of the party. This could be understood as a measure to enhance the authority and executive power of the party’s policies.

The 2024 Supreme People’s Assembly Election, Expected to Support Kim, Jong-un’s Sole Leadership System

In the plenary meeting of the party, a written decision called “a series of measures to strengthen the leadership functions of the party in the current era” was adopted,

but the details have not been disclosed yet. As 2024 marks Kim, Jong-un's 40th birthday and is the year of the scheduled Supreme People's Assembly Election, it is anticipated that amidst emphasizing the 5 constructive development directions for the party for a new era, efforts will be dedicated to the idolization of Kim, Jong-un and the strengthening of the executive power of state sovereignty institutions.

Unlike 2023, since there were almost no political events corresponding to anniversaries in 2024, Kim, Jong-un is expected to focus on consolidating the internalization of Kim, Jong-un's sole leadership system rather than holding large-scale events such as the Military Parade. Efforts are likely to be intensified in formalizing Kim, Jong-un's speeches, such as the '5 constructive development directions for the party' and 'strengthening the party's guidance of revolutionary schools,' which were officially adopted as the party's policies at the end of 2022. This is expected to contribute to the systematization of the "Kim, Jong-un's revolutionary thought." During the plenary meeting, "policy tasks that precede legal institutions including people's sovereignty institutions, prosecution, and social safety institutions in firmly developing the socialist system" were mentioned. With the opening of borders, socialist legal control will also be strengthened. In March 2024, the elections for the 15th Supreme People's Assembly are scheduled. In this plenary meeting, ten new appointments were made to government agencies and key positions. However, since North Korea sees 2024 as a crucial year for the success of the five-year plan, a considerable number of leadership changes are expected. With Kim, Jong-un's 40th birthday approaching, a clear shift in the generation of deputies is also anticipated.

Significant Personnel Changes Despite Positive Policy Evaluations

The scale of personnel changes during this plenary meeting can be considered significant. It is comparable to the level observed during the 6th plenary meeting of the 8th Central Committee at the end of 2022, which had a strong punitive nature due to unsatisfactory policy execution. When comparing the newly appointed individuals (including duplicates) with that time, the total number of new appointments for the party, the government, and military positions decreased from 67 to 65. Among them, there was a slight reduction in the number of new appointments for key party leadership

institutions (Central Committee, General Political Bureau, Central Military Commission, Central Inspection Commission) from 51 to 45. Notably, there were no new appointments for military institutions (compared to the previous 3 appointments), while government personnel increased from 4 to 10. Despite positive policy evaluations in 2023, the significant personnel changes are noteworthy.

The most notable figure in the personnel changes during the 6th Plenary meeting of the 8th Central Committee was Park, Jong-chon. He was the number 1 in the military ranks but was reported to have been dismissed from all positions. Park, Jong-chun continued to attract attention in the recent plenary meeting. Although he did not ascend to the position of a Standing Committee member of the General Political Bureau, he has been reinstated in nearly all his previous roles, such as Central Committee member, General Political Bureau member, Party's Secretary, and Deputy Chairman of the Central Military Commission. This was already anticipated from his wearing of the rank of marshal insignia and his role as the Director of the Military Affairs of the Central Committee were already anticipated. This personnel management is understood in the context of Kim, Jong-un's demand for division of responsibilities and competition for loyalty as the defense sector has significantly expanded during his era. Another noteworthy aspect is the utilization of individuals who are included in the US government's sanctions list. Therefore, Cho, Choon-ryong, who is responsible for the production of shells for Russia, was promoted to General Political Bureau member and Secretary, and Jeon, Il-ho, known to be involved in the development of weapons of mass destruction, has been appointed as the Dean of Kim Jong Un National Defense University.

Economy

Devotion of a Significant Proportion to Economic Sector Reporting, and Presentation of Achievements in Numbers

The results reporting of the recent plenary meeting allocates a considerable proportion to mentioning achievements made in the economic sector. Particularly noteworthy is the presentation of numerical achievements in key sectors, including the '12 goals for the development of the people's economy' set as one of the goals

for 2023 in the plenary meeting at the end of the year. The achievements in key sectors were presented from two main perspectives. First, the achievement rates compared to the goals set at the end of the previous year were emphasized¹⁾. After boasting about exceeding the first-half plan achievement rates for major production items in July, especially presenting concrete figures for the first-half plans of the ‘12 goals’ and the subsequent plenary meeting comprehensively summarized the performance for the current year. While there are differences in the achievement rates across sectors, it appears that targets were met in all sectors. However, evaluating the performance of each sector solely based on the figures reported in the North Korean media is challenging due to the lack of specific goals presented at the end of the 2022 plenary meeting. Following the announcement that it initially exceeded the achievement rates set out for the 12 goals for the first half of the year²⁾ while presenting the achievement rate for its major agricultural products in July using actual numbers, the plenary session comprehensively summarizes the achievements of the current year. Although there are variations in the achievement rates among different sectors, it appears that the goals have been achieved across all sectors. However, assessing the performance of each sector solely based on the figures reported in North Korean media is challenging, as the specific goals presented during the plenary session at the end of 2022 are not known.

<Table 2> Major Achievements in the Economic Sector Mentioned in the Plenary Session

Achievement Rate	(12 Goals)	(Other Major Agricultural Products)
	Grains 103%,	Motor 220%, Transformer 208%,

¹⁾ The reporting from North Korean media lacks specific explanations on whether it is the comparison of production quantities (%) from the previous year or the achievement rate (%) compared to the set goals. However, based on a statement that “Rice paddies are at 103% (omitted) and households under construction have reached 109%, satisfying all 12 goals of economic development,” this analysis interprets it as the ‘achievement rate compared to the goals.’

²⁾ “Precious result achieved based on the spirit of self-reliance and comprehensive revitalization and development through complete mobilization, exceeded the plans for major sectors regarding 12 goals for economic development in the ongoing struggle,” Korean Central News Agency, July 4, 2023.

Compared to Goals	Electricity·Coal·Nitrogenous Fertilizers 100%, Structural Steel 102%, Nonferrous Metals 131%, Log 109%, Cement·General Cloth 101%, Marine Products 105%, Rail Freight Volume 106%, Private Home (housing units under construction) 109%	Bearing 121%, Electroplating 140%, Lead 121%, Paper 113%, Salt 110%, Cosmetic Products 109%, Plate Glass 100%, Magnesia Clinker 104%
Rate of Increase Compared to 2020	1.4-fold increase in GDP, 3.5-fold in iron oxide, 2.7-fold in pig iron, 1.9-fold in structural steel, 5.1-fold in machine tools, 1.4-fold in cement, 1.3-fold in nitrogenous fertilizers	

Promotion of Economic Recovery from 2020 Both Domestically and Internationally, Caution Warranted Regarding the Possibility of Exaggeration

Second, key agricultural product performance related to the gross domestic product (GDP) and the petrochemical industry in 2023 are being announced in the form of growth rates compared to 2020. In particular, it is highlighted that the domestic GDP in 2023 increased by 1.4-fold compared to 2020. According to the Bank of Korea, 2020 recorded the lowest growth rate (-4.5%) for the North Korean economy since the mid-1990s. It seems that North Korea is announcing its economic performance for this year compared to 2020 with the purpose of domestically and internationally promoting that the North Korean economy has overcome the worst situation. However, it is necessary to interpret the presented figures with caution, considering the possibility that North Korea's figures may be exaggerated or calculated in a way that varies from international standards³⁾. However, it is evident that North Korea has placed significant emphasis on the recovery of the metal and chemical industry sector, as it was the sector that experienced the most significant setback compared to 2020. The emphasis on the achievements compared to 2020 in the plenary session seems

³⁾ The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for this year represents the "real GDP," and for it to be 1.4 times the level of 2020, the annual average economic growth rate from 2021 to 2023 would have to be 11.9%. In 2021, the country continued to experience border closures, and trade resumed in 2022-2023. However, it is challenging to believe that North Korea achieved growth exceeding 10% annually, as it falls short of the levels seen in 2018-2019.

to serve the dual purpose of promoting this year's economic recovery both domestically and internationally, while also internally encouraging the pursuit of the goals outlined in the 5-year national economic development plan (2021–2025).

Partial Achievement in Food Production, Partial Recovery in the Metal and Chemical Sector

As North Korea itself has disclosed, this year's 'urgent issue' was to address the 'serious food shortage.' Through the reporting of this year's plenary session, various efforts by North Korea to resolve the food shortage issue can be observed. The fact that 103% of the grain production target was achieved is partially consistent with estimates by South Korea's Rural Development Administration (6% increase compared to the previous year). Additionally, the accomplishment of goals such as opening up 300,000 acres of reclaimed land, completion of the Kangdong Greenhouse Farm (scheduled for February 2024), and achievements in the livestock industry (Kwangchon Chicken Farm) and food processing industry (flour processing plant) demonstrates efforts to address food shortage. Furthermore, as for the construction of households, it presents that it achieved 109% compared to the target including households that are under construction such as Hwasong District, Sopo District, and Gomdok District.

As such, North Korea has consistently focused on the agriculture and construction sectors, which are directly linked to people's livelihoods and can create visible results using domestic resources. Since the 8th Party Congress in 2021, there has been a consistent trend of concentrating efforts on the agriculture and construction sectors, while also emphasizing the metal and chemical industry. Particularly, the metal and chemical industry is considered essential for maintaining the self-reliant economic structure pursued by North Korea. As for the metal industry, there is a heightened emphasis on the production of 'Juche steel' to replace steel that is difficult to import due to sanctions against North Korea⁴⁾. The chemical industry is directly related to

4) The reports on the Kim Chaek Iron and Steel Complex's energy-saving oxygen heat blast furnace and the expansion of the oxygen separator, as mentioned in the plenary session, have been ongoing since early this year. It has been confirmed that these facilities recently

fertilizer production, which is essential for increasing food production. Considering the urgent need for the recovery of the chemical industry, which has been most severely affected by sanctions against North Korea, to achieve the goals of the 5-year national economic development plan, it is evaluated that North Korea concentrated mostly on the recovery of the metal and chemical sectors this year, which is the third year of the 5-year plan.

Continuation of the Current Economic Policies Including the Emphasis on 12 Goals into 2024

While there was significant emphasis on this year's achievements, there doesn't seem to be a clear change in the direction for the coming year. In particular, the statement mentioning the continuation of the 12 goals into the new year and the commitment to enhance productivity across all sectors of the people's economy, along with maintenance and reinforcement projects, suggests that the overall direction of economic policies is expected to remain largely unchanged. Additionally, the mention of development in the agriculture and rural sectors, increased production of seafood, construction of households, and modernization of machinery, light industry, heavy industry, and local industry do not differ significantly from the previous policy direction. North Korea's policies in the agricultural and rural sectors North Korea has been focusing on since 2021 mainly focused on the development of agricultural machinery, mechanization of rural economy, strict adherence to livestock regulations, and the construction of rural households and thus, no significant changes have been observed. Considering that the various achievements presented in the economic sector during this year's plenary session may be attributed to the base effect caused by the deteriorating economic conditions over the past three years and that North Korea has limited options as it is under prolonged sanctions, it doesn't seem unlikely that North Korea will maintain its current policy direction until the achievement of the 5-year national economic development plan.

completed their trial run and have entered into test production. However, detailed production capacities have not been confirmed.

External Affairs

Strengthening of Anti-America Alliance and Encampment Diplomacy

During the plenary meeting, North Korea stated that the basis of its external policies should be “conducting diplomatic affairs of the Republic that befits the status of a powerful nation in accordance with the principle of the protection of the dignity, enhancement of national prestige, and protection of national interests while actively and strategically coping with the changing international situation.” Compared to its position a year ago, there has been a relatively pessimistic shift in the perception of the international situation, and the policy principle of protection of the dignity’ was newly introduced. A notable point is the position that emphasizes “conducting diplomatic affairs of the Republic that befits the status of a powerful nation.” This signifies proactive foreign policies driven by the enhancement of nuclear capabilities and the stabilization of the Kim Jong-un regime. However, faced with conflicting international situations, North Korea's external isolation, and the compounding challenges of punitive measures against North Korea, the scope of the foreign policy that the North Korean regime can pursue is limited.

In the given external circumstances, North Korea’s practical foreign policy options are limited to maintaining a confrontational stance with the United States and its Western allies, while simultaneously pursuing alliances with a few anti-American forces such as China and Russia. In this context, Kim Jong-un, during the plenary meeting, outlined a policy of prioritizing the development of relations with socialist countries, stating, “we will focus on developing relations with socialist countries while actively enhancing relationships with anti-imperialist independent countries.”

Kim, Jong-un continued to state that North Korea will “consistently adhere to the principle of strong versus strong, and engage in a direct confrontation with the United States through a high-pressure and assertive super-hardline policy.” Furthermore, North Korea added that it “reaffirmed its unwavering intention to engage in confrontation, responding with nuclear force to nuclear force, and direct confrontation to direct confrontation in response to the provocative nuclear war threats posed by the US and its followers.” This articulates North Korea’s resolute stance of confronting

hostile forces, indicating that there is no room for diplomacy in its external policy, and it relies on “struggle... To suppress through the exercise of strong capabilities.” This reflects the intention of the North Korean regime, that it has no willingness to engage in dialogues with the US as it enters the US Presidential Election season, and rather aims to create tension to further advance its nuclear capabilities and consolidate the regime while closely monitoring the results of the presidential election.

On the other hand, the Kim, Jong-un regime is expected to expand cooperation with China and Russia. North Korea has been actively engaging in diplomatic relations with both countries since the dismantling of the Cold War era, including summit talks and foreign minister meetings, border openings, and military cooperation. Beyond regional exchanges, there is also an anticipation of official exchanges at the central government level, signifying the significant strategic solidarity among the three nations in responding to the current international situation, which extends beyond economic benefits. Particularly noteworthy is the plan revealed by the Kim, Jong-un regime for additional launches of military reconnaissance satellites, which is seen in the context of military cooperation with Russia and support from China in potential North Korean military provocations. In 2024, the most significant variables in North Korea’s foreign relations include the outcome of the US Presidential Election and the repercussions of the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations between North Korea and China. On December 18, when North Korea conducted an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launch, during the Beijing meeting between foreign ministers, Wang Yi, China’s Foreign Minister, chose to downplay North Korea’s missile launch by stating that “next year, commemorating the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations, we will hold events to promote the continuous and stable development of friendly cooperation between China and North Korea.”

The implications of North Korea’s foreign policy trends as described above suggest that first, it is challenging to be optimistic about the Korean Peninsula’s security in 2024. Depending on circumstances, intentional provocations from North Korea leading to heightened tensions could occur. Consequently, there is a need for strengthened security and diplomatic efforts by South Korea to manage the situation, ensuring the maintenance of security and foreign relations. Second, robust diplomatic communication between South Korea and the United States is necessary to convey

a strong and unified message toward North Korea and to prevent a loosening of the United States' Korean Peninsula policy during the elections. Third, it is important to monitor the influence of the 75th anniversary of the establishment of ties between China and North Korea as well as actively preparing against its impact on South Korea-China relationship and the Korean peninsula. Fourth, a strategic attitude of being consistent is warranted for the exchanges between North Korea and international organizations.

Society and Culture

Emphasis on the Improvement in Education and Cultural Living Conditions

In the evaluation of the social and cultural sector in 2023, a focus was placed on areas such as science, education, health, and sports. Notable achievements were highlighted in the field of space science and technology, particularly the successful launch of reconnaissance satellites. In the education sector, emphasis was placed on innovative qualitative changes. North Korea assessed that it made progress in advancing progressive and practical education through the establishment of an Education Research Institute, the opening of Science Library in Kim Il Sung University, the expansion of primary schools and kindergartens, and the execution of childcare policies. In the healthcare sector, North Korea claimed to have created a favorable environment for the stability of people's lives by constructing standard pharmacies and establishing pharmaceutical and medical supply factories, as well as disease prevention specialized facilities to promote health and prevent diseases among the people. In the cultural sector, accomplishments were noted in ensuring the convenience of daily life through facilities like the Young Pioneer Camp and outdoor theaters.

Emphasis on the Advancement of Cutting-edge Science and Technology and the Distribution of Education-related Materials for Students in 2024

The cultural sector, including science, education, health, literature and art, publishing, and sports, reported that practical issues were pointed out based on the achievements in 2023. Building on the experiences and lessons learned from the projects in 2023,

there was a call to accelerate efforts in all aspects of cultural development.

There was also an emphasis on the establishment of a system to concentrate and execute scientific research capabilities in order to set clear goals for advanced science and technology development plan, underline a unified control and management of science and technology development, and to make sure that emphasis on science and technology can be translated into practical life such as scientific farming. In particular, it was reported that comprehensive measures at the national level have been devised for the development of space science and technology. The emphasis on research capabilities was linked to educational reform in a manner comparable to the standards of advanced countries, that research-oriented teaching methods and learning approaches should be adopted to specify, diversify, and make practical the content and methods of education for major-related courses.

The policy of supplying quality school uniforms, bags, and shoes to all students nationwide in 2023 has been presented as a key initiative for institutions and units that produce essential items for students including Ministry of Light Industry in 2024. The supply of essential items for students was emphasized as a politically significant project that guarantees “comprehensive propaganda” before being an economically practical project for students and youth. Therefore, the policy initiative of providing essential items to students free of charge was elevated to a political project of the ‘leader’ who is responsible for future generations.

Future Prospects

The comprehensive analysis of the results of the 9th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee indicates that in the year 2024, North Korea will pursue aggressive policies towards the US and South Korea, including military actions. If successful in the announced launch of additional three reconnaissance satellites, the level of threat North Korea poses in terms of military capabilities will increase significantly, if it deploys nuclear weapons with a focus on the practical deployment of nuclear weapons. By leveraging the dynamics of the new cold war in the international society, North Korea is expected to engage in more aggressive actions aimed at creating a rift between the ROK, US, and Japan’s security cooperation while strengthening

economic and military cooperation as well as diplomacy and solidarity with China and Russia, intensifying security tensions in the region. Therefore, it is necessary for the Korean government to explore multidimensional diplomatic cooperation and coordination to prevent China and Russia from building a stronger relationship with North Korea.

In particular, it is anticipated that North Korea will maximize cyber operations to fuel internal conflict, leveraging the context of Korea's general elections in April and US Presidential Election in November. Since North Korea is highly likely to engage in local military provocations with the ROK-US joint military exercises and the suspension of September 19 Military Agreement as justification, thorough preparations are warranted. There is a possibility of North Korea exerting more efforts in psychological warfare against South Korea to split public opinion and attribute the causes of conflict to the government of South Korea.

As confirmed in the plenary meeting, North Korea is reacting very sensitively to 'unification based on liberal democratic order', which is the principle the government of South Korea continues to consistently emphasize on as the basis of its unification policies. Above all, it is crucial to pay more attention and efforts to unification education and policies to further promote the legitimacy of the government's unification policies, build and foster consensus so as to prevent the escalation of internal conflict influenced by North Korea's psychological operation. ©KINU 2023

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External Affairs: Suh, Bo-hyuk, Senior Research Fellow

Economy: Choi, Ji-young, Research Fellow

Society/Culture: Yee, Ji-sun, Research Fellow

Policies toward South Korea: Jang, Cheol-wun, Research Fellow