

# Pyongyang's Future Policy Direction Implied in Kim Jong-un's Recent Field Guidance

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After a series of summit meetings in the first half of 2018, Chairman of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) Kim Jong-un went on a two-month rigorous tour for field guidance. This field guidance provides an important opportunity to estimate North Korea's future policy direction. Since coming into power, Kim has drastically reduced the annual practice of official inspection or attendance at events. Instead, he has increasingly given weight to policy-directing activities such as field guidance, chairing meetings of the Party, government, and military, and giving speeches. In a series of this summer guidance tour, he laid out a direction of his economic development strategy, pragmatic mind-set, and challenges in managing the North Korean economy. His move also implied mounting concerns over the state governance: the DPRK's desperate situation in the midst of international sanctions for which he called on the Party to intervene as the troubleshooter; woe over a possible extension of sanctions; pressure on proving the effectiveness of Pyongyang's new approach; and the lack of measures to improve incompetent cabinet. In the meantime, the field guidance provided a glimpse of Kim's practical approach, with the possible opening-up of the North in mind on areas such as urban development, North Korea-China economic cooperation, light industry, tourism, and forestry.

Chairman Kim Jong-un's field guidance went on for as long as two months this summer. According to *Rodong Sinmun*, the leader of North Korea visited 30 units in seven regions over 54 days from June 30 to August 21: North Pyongan Province, Yanggang Province, North Hamgyong Province, Gangwon Province, Pyongyang, South Hwanghae Province, South Pyongan Province, and Wonsan city. It was followed by another rounds of visits to South Pyongan Province, North Hamgyong Province, Yanggang Province, and North Pyongan Province. To put it simply, he stopped by one unit every 1.8 days. This is a relatively tight schedule compared to the average annual interval between on-the-spot guidance visits. Over 54 days, *Rodong Sinmun* offered an extensive coverage of the tour with a total of 411 photos in 15 reports. The newspaper hailed the visits as "a rigorous march in the midst of scorching mid-summer heat," and "a grand journey out of love for people." It also emphasized the need to accelerate economic development in sync with Kim's demanding field guidance schedule.

It is first time since last December that Kim toured multiple units of specific regions over the course of several days as an on-the-spot guidance. His move is worth noticing because such field guidance has future policy implications as it took place after a busy first half-month of the year with six summits held in a row. This paper will look into the mechanism and meaning of field guidance as a means of governance under the Kim regime, and get a glimpse of Pyongyang's development strategy down the road.

### **Mechanism of Field Guidance as Means of Governance**

In the DPRK, field guidance (or on-the-spot guidance) refers to the supreme leader's visit to production, construction, commercial, and education facilities, giving direct advice and order on the ground, in places such as factories or enterprises operated under the Korean Workers' Party (KWP), government and military, commercial facilities, construction sites, fishery enterprise, and schools. What should be noted is that the field guidance described by the North Korean media should not be confused with South Korea's generally-accepted term "public activity." Public

activity is a broad and comprehensive term used by South Koreans to describe all official activities of Kim Jong-un. On-the-spot guidance, on the other hand, is a North Korean term referring to the supreme leader's major governing actions among various activities. Since Kim Jong-un took office, North Korean media has described Kim's public activities using a variety of terms. Aside from the leader's field guidance, Kim engaged in inspections, instructions, observations, attendance (to a game or performance), photo-taking sessions, meetings and consulting, joining banquets and conferences, celebration and commendation, and speeches.<sup>1)</sup>

Unlike other public activities, a field guidance follows a typical routine. The supreme leader "comprehends" and "gives instructions" before he "offers guidance." Then the people "put his words into motion." Field guidance, a concept born in the Kim Il-sung era, is a means of ruling with an aim to remove "obstacles" in the economy, generate a new "exemplary model" for production boost, or send a political message at home and abroad. Each guidance is, therefore, carefully designed in terms of venue, format, performer, and the contents of comprehension and guidance in order to accurately deliver the message. There are several varieties of field guidance: a one-time visit to a particular unit, a region-wide guidance tour, a regular guidance tour under an annual plan, and urgent field guidance depending on political or situational needs.

### Characteristics and Trends in Chairman Kim's Public Activities

Compared to his early days of office, Kim's public activities had declined in 2017 by more than half. According to *Rodong Sinmun*, the annual tally of Kim's public activities in the first seven years of his reign topped in 2013 at 211, only to decrease by 20 to 30 every year. As a result, in 2017, his public activities amounted to as low as 97, less than half of his record five years earlier. On the other hand,

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1) Kim Jong-un's visit to military units is typically described as "inspections." His attendance to military exercises, training, sport competitions, and test launches is mostly called "guidance." In rare occasions, the noun "observation" or the verb "watch" is used.

the percentage of field guidance in the entire public activities has gradually grown from 14% in his early days to 30 to 40%. As of August 21, 2018, the figure is 52%, around half of all public activities. It indicates Kim's increasing preference to on-the-spot guidance while reducing the total number of public activities.

[Table 1] The Number of Public Activities by Kim Jong-un since Taking Office  
(based on *Rodong Sinmun* reporting)

Type	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018 (8.21)
Field guidance	21	47	53	64	52	29	35
Military inspection	25	14	13	8	5	5	1
Guidance	6	19	31	8	20	15	0
Worship	11	13	9	12	7	7	2
Photo-taking session	19	17	12	18	14	9	1
Watching	25	26	20	9	6	5	2
Visit	5	5	2	0	2	2	2
Chairing meetings	6	7	10	6	6	8	3
Attendance in events	8	6	1	3	3	0	1
Parade /March	1	1	0	2	1	1	1
Observation	0	2	0	9	5	4	1
Looking around	15	38	16	9	2	1	1
Meeting/ Consulting	2	8	2	4	1	1	8
Banquet	4	2	0	0	1	3	2
Celebration/ Commendation	1	2	1	1	2	2	0
Speech	1	3	2	1	7	4	1
Mountain climbing	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
Election	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
Summit	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
On-the-spot comprehension	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>68</b>

In contrast, “inspection” to military unit has dropped by a significant margin. Kim paid a visit to military units 25 times in 2012, more than field guidance (21 times). However, that number has steadily reduced to only once this year—a comprehension on the current status of unit’s beans farming. “Guidance,” which includes observation of military training and exercises and missile test launches, has also fallen from as much as 31 times a year (highest from 2013 to 2017) to none this year. Watching performances and sport matches follow the same trends, from around 20 times per year (including Moranbong Band’s performance) to two in 2018. The number of looking-around visits had also sharply fallen from 38 times in 2013 to around once a year in the last three years.

In short, mostly around 2015, Kim’s public activities took a dramatic turn after his first two to three years in office from 2012 to 2014. A sharp decline in military inspection, military exercise observation, watching performances and sport games, and simple looking-around visits all began in 2015. At the beginning of his ruling, Kim sought to focus on military inspection to tighten his grip on the military, while coming into contact with North Korean people via shows, sport events, and simple visits. From 2015 and onward, however, his focus has shifted to providing on-the-spot guidance in economic and construction workplace, chairing meetings of the Party, government, and military, and giving speeches. In other words, he has significantly reduced official activities with little substance to concentrate on policy-directing in the forms of field and simple guidance.

### **Characteristics in Recent Field Guidance (1): A Series of Intense Guidance Tour Resumed**

Most notably, field guidance tours occurred in a concentrated time span. A field guidance tour typically takes place between May and August, to review the implementation of yearly tasks given at the beginning of the year. Also, such tour aims to encourage making performance before Day of the Foundation of the Republic (September 9), Party Foundation Day (October 10), and fall harvest. In 2012, Kim’s on-the-spot guidance solely focused on Pyongyang. However, in the following years,

he visited six regions over two months (May 14 to July 16) in 2013, five regions over two months (May 25 to July 26) in 2014, three regions in a month (May 7 to June 3) in 2015, 16 places around Pyongyang and South Pyongan Province over three months (May 15 to August 18) in 2016. The only exception was in 2017, when he allocated much of his time to missile test observations.

Indeed, late 2017, Kim committed himself to attending nuclear and missile tests, as if devoting all his remaining energy to it, reducing field guidance tour to around half from 52 to 29 compared to 2016. The first half of 2018 was dedicated to international diplomacy, leaving field guidance effectively halted. Therefore, this summer guidance tour can be seen as a resumption of annual intense guidance tours. Chairman Kim announced a five-year plan for national economic development during the Seventh Workers' Party Congress in 2016, and declared a strategic policy change to "the construction of economy" at the Third Plenary Meeting of the Seventh Central Committee of the KWP on April 2018. In addition, the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the North Korean regime is approaching. So it is not hard to presume that Kim is under strong pressure to produce economic results. His wider-than-ever guidance tour in a short time span this summer might be an attempt to infuse a sense of goals across the economic and bureaucratic communities.

### **Characteristics in Recent Field Guidance (2): Guidance Planning and Execution Led by Party's Organization and Guidance Department**

During the guidance tour, Kim was mostly accompanied by the members of the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD) of the KWP. Deputy Director Jo Yong-Won of the OGD accompanied Kim to all 30 field guidance tours: First Deputy Director Hwang Byung-seo did 27 times, and Deputy Director Oh Il-jung 20 times. In addition, Director Kim Yong-su of the Finance Accounting Department accompanied him to the guidance 20 times, Director Kim Chang-seon of the State Affairs Commission 11 times, and Director Han Gwang-sang of the KWP nine times. This indicates the OGD taking the lead in planning and executing the guidance tour,

along with the top financial officer Kim Yong-su, and Kim Jong-un's de facto Chief of Staff Kim Chang-seon. Director of the OGD Choe Ryong-hae, followed Kim's guidance visits only three times this summer, all to relatively short-distance destinations such as Pyongyang and South Hwanghae Province. In total, 13 people joined Kim for the 54-day guidance tour. When ruling out one-time entourages, Hwang Byung-seo, Jo Yong-Won, Oh Il-jung, and Kim Yong-su appear to be the key members of Kim's field guidance.

In the early days, Kim Jong-un was accompanied by a large group of top-level Party, government, and military officials: most notably then Director of the Administrative Department of the Party Jang Seong-taek, and Director of the State Security Department Kim Won-hong. From 2016, however, Kim Jong-un streamlined attendants, only keeping close aides such as Hwang Byung-seo, Jo Yong-Won, and Choe Ryong-hae. Still, it is exceptional that the OGD deputy directors played key roles for the entire summer guidance, which leads to two interpretations. First, the OGD's power in the regime might be greater than ever before. After the dismissal of Kim Won-hong, once considered to have invincible power, the OGD rose to the core of the regime from around late 2016 to early 2017. After 2016, increasing number of current or former high-level officials of the OGD have served the supreme leader for the guidance tour. It is an indication that the Party and especially, the OGD are at the center of Kim's reign of power.

### **Characteristics in Recent Field Guidance (3): Party to Take Charge of Economy and Policy Management**

During the guidance tour, Kim demanded that the Party spearhead economic matters and take full responsibility for producing an outcome. He harshly criticized the cabinet, reproaching them with "their negligence and whining on poor conditions," "only taking care of urgent matters," "lack of responsibility unfit for a master," "incompetent attitude on projects" and "chronic formalism and reliance on tricks to avoid trouble." He did not hide his mistrust to the cabinet, saying "cabinet alone

would not solve issues even after a generation.” While his chastening extended to Provincial Party Committees, the economic department of the Party, and the OGD, they were blamed for carelessness, instead of “incompetence” or “mistrust.”

The Party, in fact, was asked to be a troubleshooter. At one point during the summer field guidance, Kim mentioned a “revolutionary measure,” ordering “key constructions to be completed by October 10, 2019 by fully mobilizing the entire Party organization and its members.” Most resolutions Kim provided during the field guidance were by and through the Party. Be it unlocking the unmet needs for machines and equipment, coming up with measures to secure finance and raw materials, and guaranteeing the speed and quality of construction projects, Kim tasked it to the KWP. It is a departure from the previous stance in which, Kim, at least on the outside, stressed cabinet as a primarily responsible institution for economic issues. The shift may be a reflection of the cabinet’s weak grip on the economy, which makes it difficult to produce even nominal outcomes without the KWP’s assistance. With sanctions against Pyongyang likely to prolong, Kim may decide that the cabinet is unable to make a success alone, turning to the Party to manage the economy and produce tangible results instead.

#### **Characteristics in Recent Field Guidance (4): Bluntly Pointing Out Problems and Woe over Sanctions Phase**

In an unusual move, the local media was not shy of reporting Kim’s negative comments during the guidance. In particular, Chairman Kim showed a stark contrast of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with strong words. His verbal attacks included “so shabby,” “shameless behaviors,” “like a stable never repaired,” “band-aid repair of a building,” “like a train wreck,” “never seen such workers before,” and “extremely furious.” Not a single photo of Kim smiling was taken in workplace units that he denounced. It is very uncommon compared to the standardized North Korean media coverages of the past, which were full of praise and satisfaction over their achievement. One may say this reminds of critiques by his grandfather, Kim Il-sung.

The unusual harshness could be interpreted in three ways. First, it may be



Kim's wake-up call, signaling his attention diverted to the economy after prioritizing foreign affairs in the first six months of the year. Second, it may reflect his frustration. Having declared "construction of the economy" as his top priority, Kim might feel let down by bureaucrats that failed to catch up a change of policy as he expected. Third, his words may contain woes over sanctions. From his field guidance visit to the Kalma coastal tourist zone on August 17, Kim Jong-un started urging people to show off achievement against "gangster-like blockades through sanctions" and "maneuvers to crush us off to death." Demand to boast economic performance through big construction projects in response to sanctions had often been found in his remarks from 2016 to 2017 amid the North's pursuit for nuclear and missile sophistication. Meanwhile, some goals were readjusted, possibly in response to an effect of sanctions. In one construction site, he pointed out poorly built parts and ordered to complete the work until the Party Foundation Day on October 10, 2019. This appears to an adjustment of goals and schedule in anticipation of prolonged sanctions.

### **Characteristics in Recent Field Guidance (5): Focus on Light Industry, Tourism, Urban Development, Daily Necessities, Forestry, and North Korea-China Economic Cooperation**

Every field guidance is a result of meticulous planning. By looking at Kim's destinations of recent guidance tour, therefore, one can infer North Korean leader's policy priorities and future plan. Notably, he showed a strong affection to the construction of Samjiyon and Kalma coastal tourist zone. Kim visited Samjiyon twice during this summer tour, leaving the total number of visits at 5 since coming into power. The construction of Samjiyon is a "Party, nation, and society-wide project" in which the KWP and government funds have been directly injected. The vision is to create a standard and exemplary town that epitomizes the leader's belief on civilization. Interestingly, many of the pictures taken in Samjiyon shows Kim, with a smile on his lips, looking down the construction site from the Begae cliff observatory, as if planning a mountain village in Swiss. This may be a glimpse of Kim's future economic development strategy, connecting the town to the

development of Mubong International Special Tourist Zone, which was designated earlier.

The Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist zone—the leader’s another pet project—was also visited by Kim twice during the summer tour. A group of key aides within the Party, the newly-appointed Director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People’s Army Kim Su-gil, and his wife Lee Seol-ju, accompanied him. A set of aerial shots of the area from various angles were also made public. In the 2018 New Year’s Day address, Kim urged workers to complete the project as soon as possible, as part of Wonsan-Mt. Kungang Tourism Zone development. The area is likely to be a major destination of North Korea’s economic development strategy in the process of denuclearization. In terms of regional development, his decision to visit Shindo-gun, or silk island, has significant implications. It was the first destination of the 2018 summer guidance tour, shortly after three rounds of Pyongyang-Beijing summit talks. The choice might reflect Kim’s interests in developing the Shinuiju Special Economic Zone.

Other destinations of the summer tour matched what was announced in the 2018 New Year’s Day address. A relatively large part of the tour was devoted to commodity-producing light industry, such as bags, food, textile, fiber, and cosmetics production. Potato farms, fish farms, tree nursery, fishery enterprise, shipyards, power plants, trolley bus, and train factories all correspond to what was laid out in the New Year’s speech—agriculture, fishery, shipbuilding, forestry restoration, electricity engineering, and railroad transportation. Notably, throughout the tour, Kim skipped workplaces related to heavy industry such as metals, chemicals, and machinery. This may imply that North Korea’s current conditions make it hard to invest in large machinery industries or expect good results. In this context, Pyongyang’s new economic development strategy, in connection with denuclearization and establishment of a peace regime, is likely to focus on areas including light industry, tourism, urban development, daily necessities, forestry, and North Korea-China economic cooperation, all of which are highly related to opening-up and economic cooperation.

## Characteristics in Recent Field Guidance (6): OGD and PAD at the Center of Visual Politics

On-the-spot guidance is deemed a means to resolve some stubborn challenges for the regime. And destinations for a year's regular guidance tour are decided by the OGD in the year before, after receiving suggestions and proposals by the supreme leader, the Secretariat, Political Bureau, and the cabinet. The Guidance Planning Paper written by OGD becomes finalized after gaining approval from the Political Bureau. Once the itinerary is confirmed, the First Office of Inspection of the OGD sets up "Group for the Understanding of the Guidance Project" to evaluate Party-led projects and administrative projects of the visiting region. The supreme leader provides guidance and tasks based on the Office's evaluation results. Units that received the guidance must become a national model. Active support from the central authority would follow to address "pending challenges," with Premier and other top officials' visits for follow-up. Nation-wide events to inspire people and put the leader's words into action also ensue.

Media reports of Kim's on-the-spot guidance are made based on a highly sophisticated iconology and calculated mise-en-scène. Displaying "visual politics" through field guidance is perhaps the most compelling part of Kim Jong-un's leadership. To put it simply, the visual effects of a guidance visit have notably strengthened. During the summer guidance tour, local newspaper published an average of 14 photos for each destination, sometimes as many as 32, including aerial shots. All the news articles covering the tour are credited to "political news team," which refers to the Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD) of the KWP. This implies that Kim Jong-un's sister and PAD's First Deputy Director Kim Yeo-jung, may be at the center of the visual politics. Edited articles go through the supreme leader's review and gain his signature before publication. Field guidance, in terms of both content and format, is a highly stylized genre with sophisticated political implications.

## Characteristics in Recent Field Guidance (7): Lee Seol-ju's Growing Presence in Field Guidance and Change in Title

Another interesting aspect is Lee Seol-ju's increased presence in the filed guidance tour. From 2012 to 2014, Lee had joined her husband in public activities 51 times, roughly 17 to 21 times a year. From 2015 to 2017, her appearance had dwindled to one third, a mere 17 times, probably due to personal matters such as childbirth and infant care. Looking closer, she had accompanied him to field guidance only 10 times throughout 2012 until 2017. Most of her attendance to public activities was limited to performances, banquets, and official worships.

However, 2018 has seen a dramatic increase of her appearance in public activities and field guidance. As of August 21, she has joined 19 of them, almost a double her total participation over the last six years (10 times). More interestingly, she was spotted in workplace related to economic development. While most of her visits were related to light industry or daily necessities (cosmetic products, pharmaceuticals, food, bags, and restaurants), she also came to a construction site. In contrast, her past appearances were all but related to the service sector including restaurants, parks, hospitals, fruit farms, and volunteer stations. Furthermore, her destinations are no longer limited by the boundaries of Pyongyang. In 2018, she has gone out to as far as Shinuiju, South Hwanghae Province, Yanggang Province and Gangwon Province. In addition, she was referred to as 'comrade' in recent guidance tour instead of 'madame,' her title at the six rounds of summits earlier this year. Her increased presence in economy-related guidance visits and change of her title seem to signal her emergence as Kim's official political aide as opposed to serving a diplomatic role as first lady. Therefore, it appears reasonable to expect for Lee to accompany Kim in the future and have an impact on economic management.

### Conclusion

On-the-spot guidance has historically been a means of displaying the supreme leader's extraordinary leadership by resolving economic issues and

providing a ‘royal touch’ that alleviates the unit’s concerns. In this regard, Kim has utilized the summer guidance tour of 2018 to recreate a typical Kim Il-sung-esque field guidance, simultaneously showing harsh denunciation and benevolent affection of the dear leader.

On the other hand, the tour has demonstrated Kim Jong-un’s vision for the North Korean economy, his practical mind, and challenges in economic management. His order to the KWP to take charge of economic matters seems like a reflection of a Party-led governance on the surface. However, on the inside, it indicates the pressing situation that the regime currently faces and the desperate need to bring the Party forward to directly tackle it. Woes might be plenty in Kim’s mind: worry over the prolonged sanctions, pressure to show achievement after a change in policy direction, and a lack of measures to cope with incompetent cabinet. In terms of content, Kim stressed regional development, North Korea-China economic cooperation, light industry, tourism, and urban development among others, replacing the conventional economic policy that stubbornly emphasized the heavy industry. This could be interpreted as a signal of practical approach with opening-up in his mind in the future. In this regard, Kim’s destinations for next field guidance will be worthy of close attention and observation as the transition into denuclearization and a peace regime proceeds. ©KINU 2018

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