



**The 8th Congress of Workers' Party of Korea,
Kim Jong-un's Thoughts and Future of North
Korea**

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Abstract

North Korea is an enigma, and it follows a leader-centric approach. The Workers Party of Korea is the highest-ranking body of North Korea. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, last one year onwards, North Korea is in self-isolation and world hardly have any clue about Kim Jong-un and DPRK. This paper attempt is to discuss the 8th congress of Workers Party of Korea, 2021, especially its focus on Kim Jong-un speeches and congress resolutions and its remarks on Inter-Korean relations, North Korea-America relations, and North Korea's economic plan. This is a delve for understanding and analysing Kim Jong-un's thoughts and its implications.

The 8th Congress of Workers Party of Korea introduced a new five-year plan and approved 138 candidates as members of the Party Central Committee and also alternate members of 111 candidates and elevated Kim Jong-un to General Secretary of the Workers Party of Korea and rules of WPK are modified which give more control to Kim Jong-un. This paper argues that Kim Jong-un aims to utilise Covid-19 pandemic crisis to conduct the 8th congress to target prunes and hold complete traction over the party and fill the North Korean peoples with new hopes and promises. Kim Jong-un modified the WPK rules to fortify and fiefdom over the party.

Keywords

Kimilsungism, North Korean economy, Workers' Party of Korea, Party Congress of WPK, Reform in North Korea

Introduction

North Korea is an enigma. Many scholars across the world try to decipher North Korea's various facets but the puzzle remains incomprehensible. Even though, North Korea is a nuclear state which could be ignored, there are hardly enough clues about what is happening in North Korea. Especially in the last one year, there are lots of speculations of disappearance and reappearance of top leader Kim Jong-un, the role and position of his sister Kim Yeo-jung¹ and North Korea's actions and intents.

Thus, the 8th Congress of Workers Party of Korea which was held in early-2021 might be a good opportunity to have a peak about what is happening in North Korea and also know about Kim Jong-un's thoughts. Kim Jong-un was in the headlines in 2018 and 2019 as he participated in the inter-Korean summits and the US-North Korea summits. After the derailment of the US-North Korea denuclearisation talks after the Hanoi summit, there have been little authentic information about the thoughts and strategy of Kim Jong-un. The 8th Congress of Workers Party of Korea (WPK) thus becomes pertinent to be studied and analysed as it gives us a clue about the present and future of not only North Korea but also its implications for the Korean peninsula and the region. The Congress is important because formally it might be considered as the blueprint of the North Korea's future as well as remarks of the leader Kim Jong-un as the ideological orientation of the country.

There were many speculations about the last five-year economic plan of North Korea which was supposed begin in May 2016 and end in April 2021, but ended prematurely in December 2020. A lot of questions were raised when North Korea announced the premature end of the current economic plan. Does it mean that North Korea is willing to change the strategy or goals of its economic plan or does it want to give a message to the new US administration? There were also questions about the future strategy of the Kim Jong-un's regime, what implications it would have for the Inter-Korea relations and the message it wants to convey to the new US administration under Joe Biden.

¹ Kim Yeo-jung is also known as Kim Yo-jong. She is the sister of Kim Jong-un and daughter of Kim Jong-il and granddaughter of Kim Il-sung.

The WPK is the highest-ranking body of North Korea and is also supposed to lay down guiding principle for the country in every aspect. WPK discusses everything about the party, state, their direction as well control over other institutions. It is very hard to understand and analyse Kim Jong-un's approach to the outside world. North Korea is a hermit Kingdom and it is self-isolated from other nations due to various factors such as international sanctions and Covid-19 pandemic.

North Korea follows a leader-centric approach and this paper attempts to discuss the 8th Congress of Workers Party of Korea, 2021, with a special focus on Kim Jong-un's official speeches, congress resolutions and its remarks on inter-Korean relations and North Korea-US relations. The Party Congress also provided a glimpse of the "brilliant comrade"² Kim Jong-un and his policy of "byungjin"³ (Parallel Development), which aims for dual goals of economic development along with augmenting security.

Background

The Workers Party Korea is the highest-ranking body and main decision maker in North Korea. The party's thoughts are considered to be Kim Jong-un's thoughts and Kim Jong-un's thoughts are considered to be North Korea's thoughts. WPK's 8th Congress was held from 5-12 January, 2021 and it was a longer Congress compared to the last congress. North Korea had seven Party Conferences in 1946, 1948, 1956, 1961, 1970, 1980 and 2016 before the 8th Congress in January 2021.

In the 7th Party Congress held between 6-9 May, which was held after a gap of 36 years, allowed foreign media to cover the highest events of North Korea with limitations.⁴ The event emphasised more on unity, *juche* and *Kimilsungism* and *Kimjongilism*. The left side banner at auditorium read 백전백승 'ever victorious' and right side banner read 일심단결 'single-heart unity' and the main banner read 조선로동당 제 7 차 대회 '7th Congress of Workers party of Korea'.⁵ In the 7th Congress of WPK, an economic plan for five-years and political ideologies were examined thoroughly and further strengthening of military power to secure from external

² See, (Kalpan and Denmark 2011).

³ On this point see, (Choi 2015).

⁴ See, (Frank 2016).

⁵ For further details on Kim Jong-un opening speech at the Seventh Congress of WPK, see (YouTube 2016).

forces. This event discussed reunification and external forces and it also focused on a new model of development based on “Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism” (Kim 2016). Kim Jong-un appealed in the Congress that “Let the Whole Party Make Selfless, Devoted Service for the Good of the Great People.”⁶ Kim Jong-un in the concluding message said that the party’s slogan, “Everything for the people, everything by relying on them,” and “The people are my God” (Kim 2016). Numerous times ‘people’ are referred to in the congress such as ‘everything for the people’ (Kim 2016). The 7th Congress of Workers party of Korea was important because it demonstrated the hold of Kim Jong-un on the Party and its organization. The lack of it is considered to be the primary reason why the Party Congress was not held even once by his father Kim Jong-il.

Workers Party of Korea’s 8th Congress

The 8th Workers Party Congress began on 5 January 2021 in the April 25 House of Culture, Pyongyang and unlike previous Congress, foreign media was not allowed. One of the reasons for this change could be ban on foreign visitors inside the country due to Covid-19 pandemic. The Congress was important because it happened after five-years, which is stipulated in the Party constitution and it had in-depth discussion on success and failure of the country. The Congress continued for eight days and concluded on 12 January 2021. It was one of the longest Congress of the WPK.⁷ In the auditorium the left side banner read 이민위천 ‘the people are god’ and right side banner read 일심단결 ‘single-heart unity’ and the two main banners read 전당과 온 사회를 김일성-김정일 주의화하자!- let us make this hall and whole society on the foundation of Kimilsungism and Kimjongilism and 조선로동당 제 8 차 대회 8th Congress of Workers Party of Korea.⁸

The agenda of the first day of the Congress had the following items: first, “Review of the work of the WPK Central Committee,” which was covered by speeches by Ri Il Hwan and others; second, “Review of the work of the Central Auditing Commission of the WPK,” which was covered by the speeches by Kim Myong Hun and Ri Chang Song; third, “On amendments to the

⁶ See, (Kim 2016).

⁷ See, (Asahi Shimbun 2021).

⁸ For further details on 8th Congress of WPK, see, (YouTube 2021).

rules of the WPK,” which was presented by Pak Thae Song and; fourth, “election of the central leadership body of the WPK” (Pyongyang Times 2021).

In the opening speech Kim Jong-un emphasised that the five-year economic plan ended last year and “almost all sectors fell a long way short of the set objectives,” resulting in a lot of lessons.⁹ In the Sixth Plenary meeting of the Seventh Central Committee in August 2020, they discussed thoroughly about the agendas and their progress of the seventh congress and the very little achievement they had and the need to go a long way.¹⁰ Kim Jong-un emphasised that WPK is the only guarantee for defending the country and protecting people from external evils (Rodong Sinmun 2021). As per a report by the Pyongyang Times, “Attending this congress are 250 members of the leadership body of the Seventh Party Central Committee and 4750 delegates elected by organizations at all levels throughout the Party” (Rodong Sinmun 2021).

Kim Jong-un used the 8th Congress of Workers Party of Korea to explain the details of ideology and theory to construct own-style socialist state under the banner of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism. Kim Jong-un titled as, “Chairman of the WPK, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and Supreme Commander of the armed forces of the DPRK,” presented a review of the 7th Central Committee of the Party in the 8th Congress (Pyongyang Times 2021).

Kim Jong-un’s Review of the 7th Party Congress

1. Achievements Made in the Period under Review

This report analysed the economic work undertaken under grave internal and external situations. The party followed single mind unity to achieve people-first principle under the party guidance to achieve socialist construction of the state. Kim Jong-un said that North Korea had

“developed the super-large MLRS, a super-power attack weapon that the world’s weaponry field had never known, and proceeded to develop ultra-modern tactical nuclear weapons including new-type tactical rockets and intermediate-range cruise

⁹ For more details on Kim Jong-un opening speech at 8th Congress of WPK, see, (Pyongyang Times 2021).

¹⁰ See, (Rondong Sinmun 2021).

missiles whose conventional warheads are the most powerful in the world” (Pyongyang Times 2021).

He further emphasised that North Korea is going to develop more nuclear arsenals and be stronger in terms of military capability (Pyongyang Times 2021). It was also emphasised that North Korea would seek more cooperation with other socialist countries of the world namely, China, Russia, Cuba and Vietnam to develop the socialist ideology.¹¹ The summits between North Korea and the US were mentioned and it was said that the summit talks are historic talks in world history.

2. For Epochal Progress in Socialist Construction

The Congress analysed the economic and cultural construction, defence-building, state and social administration, and the working people’s organisations mistakes and lessons. Kim explained a new strategy for an economic development plan with long term vision and admitted that “national economy fell a long way short of implementation and consequently the people’s living standards could not be improved remarkably.”¹² Kim Jong-un said that, “economy of the country can never be boosted without breaking with the wrong ideological viewpoint, irresponsible working attitude, incompetence and obsolete working manner” (Pyongyang Times 2021). In the new economic plan, targeted industries are metal and chemical industries along with the agriculture sector, as the agriculture sector is experiencing worst growth due to sanctions and natural disasters and above all Covid-19 pandemic. The new five-year plan implementations are given to the cabinet through the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) which implements the policies of economic development in general and is guided by the Workers Party of Korea.¹³ Second day remarks on new five-year plan discussed most of the categories such as transportation, infrastructure, communication, commerce, land environment protection, urban management, external economic relations and other major sectors and economic management field, agriculture, light industry and fishing industry and others and projected on the development of living standards of peoples (Pyongyang Times 2021). Science and Technology developments are urged in the report.¹⁴ Tourism got a special place in the new five-year plan and focusing on Mt.

¹¹ For more details on Review of the 7th Party Congress at 8th Congress of WPK, see, (Pyongyang Times 2021).

¹² See, (Pyongyang Times 2021).

¹³ See, (Pyongyang Times 2021).

¹⁴ For more details on Kim Jong-un second-day report at 8th Congress of WPK, see, (Rodong Sinmun 2021).

Kumgang. It was also mentioned that a floating hotel named Haegumgang Hotel would be used as socialist symbol to promote tourism in the region (Rodong Sinmun 2021).

3. For Independent Reunification of the Country and Development of External Relations

The report also mentioned North Korea relations with South Korea and the US and suggested that South Korea needs to “halt all acts hostile toward the other side and seriously approach and faithfully implement the north-south declarations.”¹⁵ Kim Jong-un said that cooperation in epidemic prevention and humanitarian field and individual tourism are not related to the development of Inter-Korean relations. North Korean approach appears to be contrary to South Korea’s repeated calls for joint cooperation against Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁶ It is important to remind that in 2020, North Korea destroyed the Inter-Korea joint Liaison office in Kaesong citing provocative steps of ‘anti-Pyongyang leaflets’ by South Korean human rights activists. The office was established under the joint Panmunjom declaration, 2018. Kim Jong-un also said that North Korea had repeatedly warned South Korea that “they should stop introducing latest military hardware and joint military exercises with the US.”¹⁷ North Korea has been always worried about the joint drills by the US and South Korea and military up-gradation of South Korea. Kim Jong-un said that DPRK-US relations will be “power for power and goodwill for goodwill in the future” (Pyongyang Times 2021).

4. For Development of Party Work

Kim Jong-un also underlined the need for reforms in the party and warned against abuse of power, bureaucracy, irregularities and corruption in the party. In this context, the inspection commission of the WPK was closed and its duties were assigned to the Central Auditing Commission. It was also underlined that WPK needs modification itself as per changes happening within North Korea and outside. The rules can never be constant and need to be adjusted as per the situation and environment. On 7 January 2021, third-day remarks that Kim Jong-un emphasised on was on socialist cultural environment in education, public health, literature and arts and the need to learn lessons from its shortcomings. It was openly admitted that Youth league and the Party’s outer organisations have failed to fulfil their duties and there was a need to work on ideological

¹⁵ See, (Pyongyang Times 2021).

¹⁶ On this point see, (Pyongyang Times 2021).

¹⁷ For more details on North Korea blows up Inter-Korean joint liaison office in Gaeseong, see, (YouTube 2020).

construction to achieve the socialist state.¹⁸ On 8 January 2021, while discussing the first agenda item as, “Review of the work of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea,” Ri Il Hwan and others urged reforms in the Party to make it “reality-friendly and people-friendly” by interacting more with the public and bring the Party closer to people to achieve Korean socialist state.¹⁹ The discussion on the same agenda continued next day too. The second agenda item as “Review of the work of the Central Audit Commission of the WPK,” was discussed by Kim Myong Hun and Ri Chang Song, and then the third agenda item as “On amendments to the rules of the WPK,” was discussed by Pak Thae Song in which he emphasised that the modifications must be based on Juche- the main guiding principles of the party.²⁰ On the fifth day, the Congress adopted a resolution “On amendments to the rules of the WPK,” the gist of which was reported by the Pyongyang Times as following:²¹

- The Party Rules were modified and supplemented in chapters and articles defining the working rules of conduct, mode of activities and norms to be observed by Party organizations and members.
- It was supplemented that Party congress shall be held every five years and modified that a notice on the convention of Party congress shall be issued several months earlier.
- Contents about reviewing the work of the Party Central Auditing Commission and electing it were deleted, and it was specified that it shall be elected at the plenary meeting of the Party Central Committee.
- The office regulations of chairmen and vice-chairmen of Party committees at all levels were changed into chief secretaries, secretaries and deputy secretaries, and the Executive Policy Council changed into Secretariat and Executive Policy Office into Secretarial Office
- It was also supplemented that a department (including non-permanent organization) shall be set up in the Party Central Committee and when necessary the Party Rules shall be modified and executed and then submitted to the Party congress for approval.
- It was supplemented to the article stipulating the duty and power of the Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee that the Political Bureau convenes the plenary meeting of the Party Central Committee.

¹⁸ For more details on Kim Jong-un report on third day of 8th Congress of WPK, see, (Rodong Sinmun 2021).

¹⁹ For more details on report on fourth day of 8th Congress of WPK, see, (Rodong Sinmun 2021).

²⁰ For more details on report on fifth day of 8th Congress of WPK, see, (Rodong Sinmun 2021).

²¹ In 8th Congress of WPK, the Party rules are revised, see, (Pyongyang Times 2021).

- It was defined as an article that the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee shall discuss and decide on the important issues urgently arising in politics, the economy and military and discuss the matters of appointment and dismissal of leading officials of the Party and the state, and that members of the Presidium can preside over the meeting of the Political Bureau upon authorization by the head of the Party.
- It was newly supplemented that the meeting of the Central Military Commission of the Party can be convened with attendance of necessary members only in disregard of presence rate, according to the character of the agenda. This has provided a practical guarantee for ensuring promptness in the discussion of urgent military affairs.
- It was specified in the Rules that the Inspection Commission of the Central Committee of the Party is dissolved and its function is transferred to the Central Auditing Commission of the Party.
- As the Party Central Auditing Commission is vested with stronger power, the power of the provincial, city and county Party auditing commissions has been raised and an article regarding it was newly created.
- It was also supplemented that conference of secretaries of cells of the Party and conference of secretaries of primary Party committees shall be convened every five years.
- Clearly stipulated are the nature of the People's Army as the revolutionary armed forces of the WPK and the duties of Party organizations at all levels within the People's Army.
- The new name of the youth league was included. The issue of changing the name of the youth league will be decided at a future youth league congress (Pyongyang Times 2021).

It appears that these changes will further elevate Kim Jong-un's stature in the Party and North Korea projecting him as at par to his grandfather, who is the eternal leader of North Korea and the Party. The changes are to make it possible for the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee to take any decision regarding military and economic issues and also appoint and remove the members. Kim Jong-un is making the party follow his footsteps while monitoring and regulating it as per his wish and command.

On 10 January 2021, the Congress passed a resolution, on election of General Secretary of the WPK and followed by the fourth agenda as, "Election of the Central Leadership Body of the WPK" (Pyongyang Times 2021). The party approved 138 recommended candidates as members

of the Party Central Committee and also alternate members of 111 candidates.²² Kim Jong-un is unanimously elected as the General Secretary of the Workers Party of Korea (Pyongyang Times 2021). The first plenary meeting of 8th Central Committee was held as per the revised rules and elected new Political Bureau, Presidium of the Political Bureau, Secretaries and Central Military Commission, the Central Auditing Commission and editor-in-chief of Rodong Sinmun (Pyongyang Times 2021). The power of Party Central Auditing Commission has been raised and provided for supervision and investigation for tightening the discipline within the Party. It is intended to further tighten control of Kim Jong-un over the party.

On 11 January 2021, sectoral consultative meetings were held. The meetings were supervised by Choe Ryong Hae, Jo Yong Won, Ri Pyong Chol and Kim Tok Hun. The aim of these meetings was to thoroughly discuss the practical approaches to achieve the new five-year economic plan of the DPRK.²³ On 12 January 2021, Kim Jong-un delivered a concluding speech and mentioned the three key principles and slogans of WPK's 8th Congress as "people are God", "single-hearted unity" and "self-reliance".²⁴ He also emphasised an approach of "do-or-die struggle to implement without fail the new five-year plan," and aim for the socialist economic construction on all fronts.²⁵ In the new five-year plan, science and technology were given preference to advance the nation in achieving the socialist state. Rural area economic growth was encouraged for the objective of improving the local living standards. The Cabinet and State Planning Commission have the authority to implement the goals of 8th Congress.²⁶ The Congress approved all the reports that Kim Jong-un submitted to the party. His closing speech was followed by a military parade and photo session.

The Congress elected Presidium of the Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee and the members are Kim Jong-un, Choe Ryong Hae (President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly), Ri Pyong Chol (Secretary of the Party Central Committee), Kim Tok Hun (Premier of the Cabinet) and Jo Yong Won (Secretary of the Party Central Committee).²⁷ In total 14

²² For more details of sixth day agenda meeting of 8th Congress of WPK, see, (Pyongyang Times 2021).

²³ Delegates started meetings to explore for the task of next five year, see (Pyongyang Times 2021).

²⁴ General Secretary Kim Jong-un delivers a concluding speech at 8th Congress of WPK, see, (Pyongyang Times 2021).

²⁵ See, (Pyongyang Times 2021).

²⁶ For more, see, (Pyongyang Times 2021).

²⁷ During 8th Congress of WPK, press release of first plenary meeting of 8th WPK Central Committee in details and for more information see, (Pyongyang Times 2021).

members are elected for the Politburo of the Party Central Committee and their names and designations are following:

1. Pak Thae Song- Secretary of the Party Central Committee and director of its Information and Publicity Department.
2. Pak Jong Chon- Chief of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army.
3. Jong Sang Hak- Secretary of the Party Central Committee.
4. Ri Il Hwan- Secretary of the Party Central Committee and director of its Department of Working people's organizations.
5. Kim Tu Il- Secretary of the Party Central Committee and director of its Department of Economic Affairs.
6. Choe Sang Gon- Secretary of the Party Central Committee and director of its Department of Science and Education.
7. Kim Jae Ryong- Director of the Organizational Leadership Department of the Party Central Committee.
8. O Il Jong- Director of the Department of Political Leadership over Military Affairs of the Party Central Committee.
9. Kim Yong Chol- Director of the United Front Work Department of the Party Central Committee.
10. O Su Yong- Chairman of the Commission of the Second Economy.
11. Kwon Yong Jin- Director of the KPA General political Bureau.
12. Kim Jong Gwan- Minister of Defence.
13. Jong Kyong Thae- Minister of State Security.
14. Ri Yong Gil- Minister of Public Security (Pyongyang Times 2021).

In total 11 members are elected as Alternate members of the Political Bureau of Party Central Committee and their names and designations are:

1. Pak Thae Dok- Director of the Discipline Inspection Department of the Party Central Committee
 2. Pak Myong Sun- Director of the Light Industry Department of the Party Central Committee
 3. Ho Chol Man- Director of the Personnel Department of the Party Central Committee
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4. Ri Chol Man- Director of the Department of Agriculture of the Party Central Committee
5. Kim Hyonk Sik-Director of the Legal Affairs Department of the Party Central Committee
6. Thae Hyong Chol- Vice-President of the SPA Presidium
7. Kim Yong Hwan-Chief Secretary of the Pyongyang Municipal Party Committee
8. Pak Jong Gun- Vice-Chairman of the State Planning Commission
9. Yang Sung Ho- Vice Premier of the Cabinet
10. Jon Hyon Chol- Chief of the Economic Policy office of the Party Central Committee
11. Ri Son Gwon- Minister of Foreign Affairs (Pyongyang Times 2021).

Members of the Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee are 19 in total (including Kim Jong-un) and their names are:

Kim Jong-un, Choe Ryong Hae, Ri Pyong Chol, Kim Tok Hun, Jo Yong Won, Pak Thae Song, Pak Jong Chon, Jong Sang Hak, Ri Il Hwan, Kim Tu Il, Choe Sang Gon, Kim Jae Ryong, O Il Jong, Kim Yong Chol, O Su Yong, Kwon Yong Jin, Kim Jong Gwan, Jong Kyong Thae, Ri Yong Gil (Pyongyang Times 2021).

Alternate members of the Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee are 11 in total:

Pak Thae Dok, Pak Myong Sun, Ho Chol Man, Ri Chol Man, Kim Hyong Sik, Thae Hyong Chol, Kim Yong Hwan, Pak Jong Gun, Yang Sung Ho, Jon Hyon Chol, Ri Son Gwon (Pyongyang Times 2021).

Department Directors of the Party Central Committee are 15 in total:

Kim Jae Ryong, O Il Jong, Pak Thae Dok, Kim Song Nam, Ho Chol Man, Kim Hyong Sik, Pak Myong Sun, Ri Chol Man, Ri Tu Song, Kang Sun Nam, Kim Yong Chol, Kim Se Bok, Pak Jong Nam, Choe Hwi, Kim Yong Su. Pak Yong Min was given charge of the Editor-in-chief of Rodong Sinmun, the organ of the Party Central Committee. The General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea is Kim Jong-un. Other seven secretaries of the Party Central Committee are Jo Yong Won, Pak Thae Song, Ri Pyong Chol, Jong Sang Hak, Ri Il Hwan, Kim Tu Il, Choe Sang Gon. Party Central Military Commission was reconstituted as Chairman Kim Jong-un, Vice-chairman Ri Pyong Chol, and 11 other members such as Jo Yong Won, O Il Jong, Kim Jo Guk, Kang Sun Nam, O Su Yong, Pak

Jong Chon, Kwon Yong Jin, Kim Jong Gwan, Jong Kyong Thae, Ri Yong Gil, Rim Kwang Il. Jong Sang Hak was given Chairmanship of the Party Central Auditing Commission and the two Vice-chairmen of the Commission are Pak Thae Dok and Ri Hi Yong. The other 12 members of the Commission are Ri Kyong Chol, Pak Kwang Sik, Pak Kwang Ung, Jon Thae Su, Jong In Chol, Kim Song Chol, Jang Ki Ho, Kang Yun Sok, U Sang Chol, Jang Kwang Bong, Kim Kwang Chol, O Tong Il (Pyongyang Times 2021).

In total 138 leaders plus Kim Jong-un were elected as members and 111 other as alternate members of the WPK Central Committee. In the 8th Party Congress, many new faces got elected in various committees who are either close to the leader or his family relatives. It means that Kim Jong-un would have more control over the party. It is important to remember that after the death of Kim Jong-il in 2011, he was declared as the Eternal General Secretary of the WPK and Kim Jong-un was given the title of “first secretary of the party” however, in the 7th Congress Kim Jong-un revised his designation as the Chairman and in the 8th Party Congress as the General Secretary of the Party.²⁸ It shows how Kim Jong-un has been consolidating his power and in the Congress he justified his rule by citing nuclear arsenals as one of his biggest achievements, though he also admitted that economic development is not achieved as promised by him.²⁹

Party Congress and Kim Siblings

There have been speculations in the last few years that Kim Jong-un’s sister Kim Yo-jong has been moving faster in the power hierarchy of North Korea and there were rumours when Kim Jong-un was not visible for more than a month in 2020 that she might take over more responsibilities sooner. However, the 8th Congress made it clear that Kim Jong-un is still in command and Kim Yo-jong would have to work longer to move higher in the power hierarchy. Even though she appears de-facto second in the command of the DPRK, it has more to do with her being a sibling of Kim Jong-un and her proximity to the leader (Asahi Shimbun 2021).

²⁸ For more details, See, (Shim 2021).

²⁹ For more details, see, (Choe 2021).

The speculation about Kim Yo-jong began with her visit to South Korea to participate in the inaugural ceremony of the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympic. She was referred as ‘peace angel’ and ‘peace diplomat’ as both Koreas began to interact with each other after her visit. She is the first member of Kim’s family to visit South Korea and her role is very diverse in Inter-Korea relations and the US-North Korea relations. She accompanied the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in most of his summit meets with the leaders of South Korea and the US. However, where there was no progress in these summit meetings, it was also speculated that her role would be curtailed or she would be sidelined. But again in 2020, when she became an alternate member of the Politburo and it was expected that the Congress may elevate her to full membership in the Bureau, the 8th Congress made her member of the Central Committee which is relatively lower body and Kim Yo-jong is ranked 21 in the power hierarchy of North Korea (Asahi Shimbun 2021).

Kim Jong-un still appears to be in the command because the way he has been able to regularise the last two Congress of the party, it indicates that he is confident about his control over the party and North Korea. Similarly to his grandfather and father who initiated their signature policies such as “Juche (self-reliance)”³⁰ and “Songun chongch’i (Military-first Politics)”³¹ and Kim Jong-un has also initiated a signature policy of his own for North Korea which is called as “byungjin” (Choi 2015: 31). In 2011, Kim Jong-un took over rein of North Korea and in 2013, introduced the Byungjin policy as a new strategy to achieve DPRK goals. Byungjin focused on self-reliance in both economy and defence.³² In 2018, Kim Jong-un declared that self-reliance in defence is successfully achieved by gaining nuclear weapons.

Kim Jong-un’s statements in the 8th Congress indicate that he has given up possibility of removal of sanctions and so he appealed to focus more self-reliance in many sectors of North Korean economy. Actually prior to the 8th Congress he announced an 80-days campaign for the same before the Congress announced its successful completion.³³ Before the 7th Congress too, Kim Jong-un used a similar campaign policy to project himself as sole guide of North Korea. After his New Year speech in 2021, Kim Jong-un sent a letter to citizens stating:

³⁰ See, (Kim 2004).

³¹ See, (Kim 2004).

³² See, Carlin (2018).

³³ For more details, see, (Asahi Shimbun 2021).

“...., I will work hard to bring earlier the new era in which the ideals and desires of our people will come true,..... Pledging once again that I will always remain faithful to the great people” (Pyongyang Times 2021).

During the October, 2020, military parade Kim shed tears while giving the speech considering the country’s situation and people’s lives filled with difficulties. Kim Jong-un emphasised in the 8th Congress that North Korea’s self-reliance in both defence and economy would be based on Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism connected with his initial policy ‘Byungjin-dual policy’. Another interesting observation about the 8th Congress is that Kim Jong-un in his speeches at the Congress used the word ‘people’ multiple times and underlined the goal of development of people. In reality, the policies of North Korea are not for the people but for the party and people have no choices but to follow the Party. However, there could be speculation that Kim Jong-un may try to connect himself with the people of North Korea through the Party directly as well as. If the speculations are right, it would be interesting to see how it unfolds in the future.

Party Congress and North Korean Economy

Even though under the Kim Jong-un rule, the standard of living has reportedly improved for few North Koreans and some market activities have also been seen, international sanctions remain to be the biggest stumbling block. The Covid-19 pandemic and some natural disasters have further augmented challenges of the North Korean economy. For the same reasons, it has been argued that the lives of North Korean common people have become tougher in the last one year and is impacting Kim Jong-un’s image in North Korean society.³⁴ Kim Jong-un has tried to recover his image through the 8th Congress. Just before the Congress, the ongoing five-year plan was prematurely ended and the new plan has been announced. The new five-year plan focuses on metal and chemical production, coal mining, tourism, modernised railways, and more public transit (Asahi Shimbun 2021). North Korea is also planning to increase electricity production and plan to invest in tidal and nuclear electricity production (Asahi Shimbun 2021). North Korea also looks to improve its mobile communication networks.³⁵ Due to Covid-19 pandemic, all

³⁴ More details, see (Asahi Shimbun 2021).

³⁵ see (Asahi Shimbun 2021).

across the globe internet usage is tremendously increased. North Korea also seeks to increase number of its mobile phone subscriptions which is estimated to be around 6 million right now along with offering more services (Korea Times 2020). North Korea has been trying to accelerate its economy through this new five-year plan, though according to market intelligence provider, Fitch Solutions, North Korea's economy may have contracted by at least 8.5 percentage in 2020 (Gallo 2021).

In the new economic plan which was lauded by the Congress, construction sector is given preference to attract tourism and promote the people to trust in the Party. Tourism got a place on the new five-year economic plan. In new economic plan, new rural area programs and new policies for industries are initiated and this important push by Kim Jong-un to the North Korean economy is being compared with Park Chung Hee's policy for South Korea in early 1970s (Frank 2021). It is important to underline that economic policy of North Korea is Party-centered and under the guidance of Kim Jong-un, its implementation is given to cabinet under the guidance of the Party. Kim Jong-un in the 5th Plenary Meeting of the Seventh Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea stated

“it is true that we urgently need external environment favourable for our economic construction, but we can never sell our dignity which we have so far defended as valuable as our own life, in the hope of gorgeous transformation” (Rodong Sinmun 2020).

Party Congress and North Korean Defence Posture

In the 8th Congress, Kim Jong-un said that the achievement of nuclear weapons is successful but North Korea needs more advanced weapons to secure its people and the Party from external evils. The 8th Congress proceedings indicated that Kim Jong-un's control over military and economy appears absolute. In the military parades during the Congress, North Korea revealed its new advanced and sophisticated weapons which may be game changer in the region. Actually, Kim Jong-un said in the Party Congress that North Korea would double the nuclear capabilities, with more “ultramodern tactical nuclear weapons”, “hypersonic gliding-flight warheads”, “multi-warhead” missiles, military reconnaissance satellites, a nuclear-powered submarine, and land and

submarine-launched intercontinental ballistic missiles that use solid fuel (Choe 2021). It is important for North Korea because even though according to Global Fire Power, 2021 Military Strength Ranking, North Korea is ranked 28th, it is surrounded by the US, Russia, China, Japan and South Korea which are ranked as 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 6th in the ranking.³⁶

Party Congress and the US and South Korea

In the 8th Congress, Kim Jong-un said that America is “our foremost principle enemy”³⁷ and “No matter who takes power in the United States, its true nature and its policy toward our country will never change” (Choe 2021). Kim Jong-un used this strategy to justify the further strengthening of nuclear deterrence policy in the congress and strictly monitor the people and party under threat from external evils. However, Kim Jong-un in the Congress also said in reference to the US: “power with power and goodwill with goodwill,” and emphasised that North Korea is a “responsible nuclear weapons state, will not use its nuclear weapons,” without provocation (Pyongyang Times 2021).

In the 8th Congress, Kim Jong-un mentioned about South Korea’s ‘hostile policies’ and stressed that Seoul should fulfil what they promised to the North leader in the last three summits. In the Congress, the “fundamental issue”³⁸ of South Korea-US joint military drills and the introduction of advanced weapons to Korean peninsula were mentioned which have been the primary cause of tension and instability in the region. In 2018, Panmunjom Declaration between North and South Korea, both sides agreed “to devise a practical scheme to turn the area of the Northern Limit Line in the West Sea into a maritime peace zone to prevent accidental military clashes and ensure safe fishing activities there,”³⁹ North Korea wants South Korea to follow its promises.

Conclusion

Overall, it seems that the 8th Congress of Workers Party of Korea was successful in achieving its objectives and presented new hopes and promises to its people. One of the key developments

³⁶ More details, see, (Global Fire Power 2021).

³⁷ More details, see, (Choe 2021).

³⁸ More details, see, (Yi 2021).

³⁹ More details on Northern Limit Line which was discussed in agreement of Panmunjom declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula, see, (MOFA 2018).

in the Congress appears to be modification in economic strategy. Kim Jong-un and the Party understood the need for a new strategy and analysed different ways to achieve the Korean style of socialist state. The new five-year plan of North Korea is less predicated on the external economic exchanges and more on building self-reliance, though it would have its own limitations. Another important outcome of the Congress is that Kim Jong-un projected himself as the highest figure in the Party. Even though, North Korea remains formally a necrocracy in which the dead leaders are revered as eternal, in the last few years, Kim Jong-un has taken more space as the absolute leader of the country. It is clearly shown by Kim Jong-un assuming the post of General Secretary of WPK which is contrary to earlier arrangement in North Korea in which Kim Jong-il was given title of eternal General Secretary of the Party. The objective of early closing the 7th congress is to restructure and recalibrate the economic strategy of North Korea and give a message to the new American administration. Above all, Kim Jong-un aims to utilise Covid-19 pandemic crisis to conduct the 8th congress to target prunes and hold complete traction over the party and fill the North Korean peoples with new hopes and promises. It means that soon 'Kimjongunism' will prevail in North Korea and Kim Jong-un will become the sole venerate and apotheosis leader of North Korea. Kim Jong-un modified the WPK rules to fortify and fiefdom over the party. The 8th Congress of Workers Party of Korea tried to show the world that the DPRK is still strong, no one can stop North Korea neither Covid-19 pandemic or sanctions to achieve its own-style of Socialist state of Korea.

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