



## Online Series

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# Analysis of the 5<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the 7<sup>th</sup> Workers' Party of Korea and the Future Prospects

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The initial outline of a new path, proclaimed by Chairman Kim Jong Un, came to the surface at the 5<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the 7<sup>th</sup> Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) (hereinafter referred to as "the Plenary Meeting"). The North did not cross a 'red line' in a carefully designed 'path.' A keyword that lies at the heart of the Plenary Meeting is "making a breakthrough head-on." It is an internal and external slogan that demonstrates its determination not to give up the autonomy and the security of the nation amidst the ambivalent attitude of the U.S. The gist of the narrative at the Plenary Meeting is that because of the inevitable nature of a prolonged 'impasse' in the U.S.-North Korea relations, the North will consolidate force with the strengthening of (nuclear) deterrence and internal power.

What is most noticeable is that North Korea did not announce a halt in the U.S.-North Korea dialogue. By defining the nature of future U.S.-North Korea relations as being at a 'protracted impasse,' Pyongyang has left open the door for dialogue depending on the U.S. stance toward North Korea. Even though there is no direct mentioning of 'nuclear weapons (nuclear force),' which was a major concern, the North revealed the intention to continue developing '(new) strategic weapons' until a long-term security is guaranteed. 'New strategic weapons' appear to be a core 'card' to pressure the U.S. The DPRK reiterated its stance that there will be no denuclearization negotiation unless the U.S. withdraws its 'hostile policies on North Korea.' It seemingly intends to follow through 'the lifting of sanctions (gradual or partial) first and denuclearization negotiations later.'

The revealed initial outline of a 'new path' turned out to be a path that combined the following: (1) muddling through its own efforts by not unilaterally conceding to the U.S. and enduring the sanctions regime, and (2) strengthening (nuclear) deterrence by imposing a certain pressure on the U.S. However, Pyongyang also left open the door for dialogue depending on the U.S.'s future stance toward North Korea. Overall, the North's decision appears to be a result of deep contemplation with a sense of restraint and carefulness, after having tried to secure as much a room for maneuvering as possible. Their intention seems to be that they will adjust what decision they make by closely watching the future developments, such as uncertainty over the U.S. presidential election, the political situation engulfing President Trump, the U.S.'s message toward North Korea, and Russia and China's 'intervention.'

North Korea released the outcomes of the 5<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the 7<sup>th</sup> Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), held throughout four days from December 28 to 31, (hereinafter referred to as "the Plenary Meeting") on January 1, 2020. The Plenary Meeting adopted a total of four agendas as follows: (1) the direction of the struggle currently facing North Korea under the present internal and external circumstances, (2) organizational issues, (3) revision of the collected slogan of the Plenary Meeting of the WPK, and (4) the celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the party. A total of eight written decisions were also adopted regarding the first agenda: the direction of the struggle currently facing North Korea. The initial outline of a new path, proclaimed by Chairman Kim Jong Un, came to the surface. To sum up, the North did not cross a 'red line,' which was a source of major concern including a warning of direct provocation and declaration of breaking off the moratorium on nuclear test-ICBM. Even though North Korea did mention a 'shocking action' and the intention for continued development of '(new) strategic weapons,' it managed to control a certain level of pressure by maintaining a certain degree of ambiguity. It could be evaluated that its carefulness was intended to secure a room for policy maneuvering. Pyongyang also left open the door for resuming negotiations depending on the U.S.'s future stance toward North Korea by describing the future North Korea-U.S. relations as being at a 'prolonged state of impasse.' As a bargaining card for the strategy on the U.S., the North laid out elements of 'time (prolonged struggle),' development of strategic weapons, and demands for repealing hostile policies in advance.

### **The Initial Outline of a 'New Path' with a Focus on Securing a Room for Policy Maneuvering**

The revealed initial outline of a 'new path' turned out to be a path that combined the following: (1) muddling through its own efforts by not unilaterally conceding to the U.S. and enduring the sanctions regime, and (2) strengthening (nuclear) deterrence by imposing a certain pressure on the U.S. The DPRK claimed that the range and intensity of deterrence, whether to implement denuclearization, and whether to withdraw from the North-U.S. 'commitment' will be determined by how the U.S. takes

a stance on the North and whether the U.S. would repeal its hostile policies on North Korea. This is not a closed ‘path’ given that it has left open the door for dialogue. Pyongyang must have contemplated how to secure as much a room for policy maneuvering as possible without upping the risk of directly provoking the U.S. Their intention seems to be that they will adjust what decision they make by closely watching the future developments, such as uncertainty over the U.S. presidential election, the political situation engulfing President Trump, the U.S.’s message toward North Korea, and Russia and China’s ‘intervention.’ It appears that the possibility of demonstrating ‘strategic weapons’ and the current level of display will serve as a core lever that will determine the future pressure and circumstances. Therefore, the path announced at the Plenary Meeting seems to be a ‘transitional’ and ‘changeable’ path in response to uncertainty over what happens in the coming year, rather than an already set and permanent path.

### **Two Dimensions in Setting a ‘Prolonged Struggle’: A ‘System Bracing for a Prolonged Struggle’ in Governance and Securing Political Time**

The North’s mentioning of a ‘prolonged struggle’ against the U.S. could be interpreted in two dimensions. First is to establish a ‘system’ bracing for an actual protracted struggle. That would mark a beginning of transitioning into a governing system for prolonged struggle under the judgment that easing sanctions is not likely in the short-term. Second, the next year could refer to a ‘political time’ that would ‘witness’ the uncertainty in circumstances and seize the ‘opportunity.’ It is intended to maintain a certain level of tension while not completely breaking off the venue created until the Trump administration’s domestic uncertainty gets lifted and the U.S. presidential landscape becomes clear. In that light, the criticism that the U.S. uses the U.S.–North Korea dialogue ‘in its political and diplomatic favor’ and exploits it with bad intentions could conversely be politically used by North Korea. In sum, the Plenary Meeting could be viewed as a venue to announce the transition to a ‘system in preparation of prolonged struggle’ at the governing level in response to the uncertainty over the coming year and to buy ‘political time’ to weigh the future developments in U.S. domestic politics. In that regard, defining the nature of future

U.S.–North Korea relations as being at a ‘protracted impasse’ could be interpreted as a tool for securing a room during the transition.

### **‘Making a Breakthrough Head-on’ with a Focus on Strengthening Self-Reliance and Adjusting the Economy in Response to Sanctions**

The gist of the narrative at the Plenary Meeting is that the U.S.’s hostile policies on the North (military threat-sanctions) are responsible for the current crisis and the severity of circumstance on the Korean Peninsula and that such policies inevitably lead to a prolonged ‘impasse’ and that Pyongyang will respond by consolidating force with the strengthening of (nuclear) deterrence and internal power. A keyword that lies at the heart of the overall reporting and decisions at the Plenary Meeting is “making a breakthrough head-on,” an expression which appeared as many as 23 times in the reporting of the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). North Korea defined a struggle through this head-on breakthrough as ‘completely breaking off’ the ‘sanctions and blockade.’ The economic front was set as the basic front line. Many pages in the reporting were given to forming a self-reliant economy. In addition, it was emphasized that a struggle of making a breakthrough head-on should be politically, diplomatically, and militarily guaranteed. The North also hinted its intention to shake up the sanctions regime imposed on North Korea by indicating the withdrawal from the ‘commitment’ of the existing moratorium on nuclear weapons tests, developing strategic weapons, and demanding to repeal hostile policies toward the North.

A struggle of making a breakthrough head-on could be summarized as that “having to live under the sanctions has to be accepted as a *fait accompli* and that internal power in each sector should be more emboldened.” This Plenary Meeting put a focus on establishing internal and external strategies, designed to make known the unjust nature of the sanctions and shake-up the sanctions while biting the bullet amidst the protracted sanctions. Even with a focus on the economy, this is distinctly different from a policy of ‘making all-out efforts in economic construction,’ adopted at the third Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the 7<sup>th</sup> WPK on April 2018. While last year’s pledge of “making all-out efforts” sought to show its will for

denuclearization and stimulate the U.S.–North Korea negotiations, this meeting’s focus on economic projects is predominantly a defensive posture in response to the prolonged sanctions regime. Sanctions must have deprived the North of the concentration required for the economic development. A future struggle of ‘making a breakthrough head-on’ is highly likely to be stressed as a slogan that highlights “cruel and inhumane sanctions,” and as a format of ‘ideology’ and a governing code. That is why Chairman Kim set the struggle framework as ‘sanctions vs. surviving through its own efforts.’

### **‘Lifting of Sanctions First and Resumption of Denuclearization Negotiations Later’—Change of Strategy in Negotiations with the U.S.**

What deserves the attention in the Plenary Meeting is that it made clear a change of strategy in negotiations with the U.S. Its stance suggests that there will be no denuclearization negotiation unless the U.S. withdraws its ‘hostile policies on North Korea.’ This is a reinforcement of North Korea’s claim expressed immediately after the break-down of the U.S.–North Korea working level negotiations held in Stockholm last October. This is a much higher framework than ‘synchronous exchange of the lifting of sanctions in return for denuclearization.’ The essential framework of strategy toward the U.S. in the future was set as a ‘withdrawal of hostile policies on North Korea first and denuclearization negotiations later,’ which seemingly intends to follow through ‘the lifting of sanctions (gradual or partial) first and denuclearization negotiations later.’ This could be interpreted as having increased the level of diplomatic offensive tactics toward the U.S. This is a card in response to the U.S.’s position of denuclearization implementation first and the lifting of sanctions later.

This strategy could be viewed as its intention to achieve an exchange framework of ‘denuclearization vs. security guarantee (including military threat ·sanctions).’ The demands for a security guarantee indicates ‘nuclear disarmament’ given that it includes the removal of nuclear deterrence provided to South Korea (nuclear umbrella of the U.S.). In fact, it is indicative of the transition to North Korea’s own style of ‘denuclearization on the Chosun Peninsula’<sup>1)</sup> that not only

denuclearization of North Korea but also the removal of nuclear deterrence provided to South Korea are included in the range of denuclearization. Chairman Kim’s remarks at the Plenary Meeting—“Our efforts of global nuclear disarmament and prevention of proliferation (non-proliferation) are being dashed”—could be read in that regard. The pledge of ‘maintaining the readiness of mobilizing strong nuclear deterrence’ until a long-term security is guaranteed could be viewed in the same context.



**‘Shocking Behavior’ and Development of ‘Strategic Weapons’—Card for Pressuring the U.S. and Maximizing the Security Guarantee**

The framework of ‘denuclearization vs. security guarantee’ is worthy of attention given that it could be used as a rationale for justifying the development of strategic weapons. In particular, one should take notice of the remarks: “We resolutely declare to continue developing strategic weapons as it is necessary and preemptive for the safety of the nation until the U.S.’s hostile policies towards North Korea are lifted and a lasting and solid peace regime is established on the Chosun

1) Concepts of denuclearization refer to ① denuclearization of North Korea: removal of the nuclear weapons program in the region of North Korea, ② denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula: removal of all the nuclear weapons program on the Korean Peninsula, as agreed by the two Koreas in the ‘Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula’ in 1992, and ③ denuclearization on the Chosun Peninsula: not only the denuclearization of North Korea but also the removal of nuclear deterrence provided to South Korea by the U.S.

Peninsula.” Even though there is no direct mentioning of ‘nuclear weapons (nuclear force),’ which was a major concern, the remarks revealed the intention to continue developing ‘(new) strategic weapons’ until a long-term security is guaranteed. New strategic weapons appear to be a core ‘card’ to pressure the U.S. While strengthening self-reliance in the economy is an internal card in response to sanctions, the development of strategic weapons could be interpreted as a card for pressuring the U.S.

The ambiguity of the North Korean term ‘strategic weapons’ could be viewed as a tactic to increase the level of response according to the U.S.’s reaction and circumstances. North Korea could also display strategic weapons as a means for pressure depending on the circumstances and conditions as follows: the shaking-up of the existing commitments, such as a moratorium on nuclear-missile activities, the display of new strategic weapons at major political events, such as the Army Foundation Day (February 8) and Kim Il Sung’s birthday (April 15), launch of weapons in conjunction with the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise, satellite launch, SLBM testing, display of MIRV (multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles) development, and test-launch of the improved *Pon’gae-6* (North Korea’s version of S-400). There, however, lies a possibility that the North might adjust the level of display with an eye towards China and Russia.

### **Format of Large-scale Plenary Meeting and the Omission of New Year’s Day Speech—Distribution of Responsibility and Burden of Transition**

This Plenary Meeting is characterized by the collected opinions of the people by unusually running over 4 days, similar to the Congress of the Workers’ Party of North Korea, discussing comprehensive agenda, and mobilizing large audiences. It could be interpreted as an intention to show the appearance of deciding on a transition to a ‘new path’ by collecting the opinions of the entire body of the party. The so-called rationale for ‘transition’ may have been secured by the scale of the meeting and the time. Core elites were seated in two rows along with Chairman Kim Jong Un. Vice Chairman of the Party Park Bong-ju, in a wheelchair, joined the last-minute group photo. This could be interpreted as an intention to show the elite group’s joint

decision-making process, a group responsible for ‘party-state’ and display the unity of their opinion. The focus is to promptly facilitate ordering the plenary decisions to each unit. Second is the distribution of responsibility and burden that comes with important decisions on transition. Even though Chairman Kim has led the transition of circumstances by pledging to denuclearize to the international community, it has hardly born fruit. It seems that he may have been burdened with a sense of ‘responsibility.’ Amidst this situation, once again reiterating a ‘transition’ to a new path that emphasizes the internal suffering must have been burdensome. In his first year in power in 2012, he promised that his people will not have to tighten their belt. He might have found it difficult to order through a New Year’s speech once again that they, this time again, have to tighten their belt. His decision to replace a New Year’s address with the decisions at the Plenary Meeting may have accounted for a poor performance of the tasks he laid out in his 2019 New Year’s Day speech.

### **A Struggle of Making a Breakthrough Head-on and Reshuffling of Party Leadership to Consolidate Internal Power**

A large-scale reshuffling took place. The reshuffling aims to strengthen the monolithic leadership system as part of a ‘system bracing for prolonged struggle against the U.S.’ along the lines of ‘guaranteeing a monolithic party,’ one of the 4 axes of the theory of state construction fleshed out at last April’s policy speech during the Supreme People’s Assembly. Two thirds of directors of specialized departments, core elite groups of the Workers’ Party’s Central Committee, have been replaced. What should be noted in this reshuffling is a replacement of core personnel of the party in a struggle of making a breakthrough head-on. What lies at the heart of such a struggle are economic projects, development of strategic weapons, and political ideology. Personnel in charge of those parts were replaced. Three people were promoted as a member of the Political Bureau of the Party and at the same time as a Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the Party: Former Vice Premier of the Cabinet Kim Duk-hoon, formal First Vice Director of the Machine-Building Industry Department Lee Byong-cheol, and former Vice Director of the Central Labor Organizations Department Lee Il-hwan. Personnel reshuffling was done regarding

strategic weapons centered around party-led machine-building industry, survival through self-reliance led by the cabinet, organizational ideology tasks, and control of the residents.

### **Improving State-managed Projects and Economic Projects to Strengthen Its Self-reliance**

This Plenary Meeting is characterized exceptionally by frank revelations about overall problems in economic projects. The meeting focused more on pointing out problems of management rather than achievements and prospects. The areas for improvement are as follows: “the state economy has not prominently improved,” the state’s power of implementation and control has weakened, the way projects are conducted has been transitional and provisional, and the role of the cabinet as an economic control tower has not been sufficient. The intention appears to be that the overall way projects are conducted will be revised for the transition to a ‘system bracing for prolonged struggle’ and the strengthening of self-reliance. The remarks may have reflected the following phenomenon that although the strengthening of the role of the cabinet has been ordered since last year’s transition of the circumstances, there have been numerous challenges, such as an age-old conflict structure between the Party and the administrative branch, structuralization of the specialized economy after the economic crisis, and state-led construction projects, hastily implemented in a short period, in conflict with the changing reality of the economy. Chairman Kim’s announcement and resolution could lead to a strengthened control and management in the non-official economic sector given that his remarks focus on emboldening state management and state control over the overall economic projects. In that regard, it could negatively affect economic activities of residents in the market.

However, Chairman Kim’s order does not indicate retracting or halting the existing economic reform. It appears to aim not only to improve the state’s capacity for control but also to more effectively manage the linkage between the state and the market. For example, restoring the state commerce system and socialist commerce aims not only to impose a check on excessive marketization and expand the state

finance—designed to guarantee both ‘the state interests and the convenience of residents’—but also to focus on making a more efficient linkage given that ‘balance’ between the two was stressed. Reforming the procedure and institutions for the “competition of developing new technology and new products” could also be viewed as improving the quality of the goods, thereby meeting the market demands. Reinforcing the specialized construction capacity aims to fulfill the increasing demands in the private construction. The realistic implementation of Socialist Corporate Responsibility Management System also contributes to increasing the linkage with the market in terms of the efficiency and decentralization of the business management. What should also be noted is a plan for implementing a 10-year economic development goal, a new economic development goal followed by a 5-year state economic development goal slated to end this year. Although the relationship between the two is not clear, the attention should be paid to the nature of this plan since it was the first time a state-level projection goal was established since 1993.

### Policy Implications

Chairman Kim Jong Un fleshed out a theory of ‘state construction’ in a policy speech given at the Supreme People’s Assembly in last April. Four axes of the state construction were suggested: 1) a revolutionary line of self-reliance on the external front, 2) self-reliant economy, 3) guaranteeing the monolithic party, and 4) people-first policy. The decision of this Plenary Meeting appeared to be rooted in this theory of state construction. One can induce that decisions made at this Plenary Session were formulated last April and had been fleshed out amidst growing uncertainty in the latter half of last year after the U.S.-North Korea talks. A ‘grand strategy’ and a ‘new strategic line’ announced at last October’s media coverage of Chairman Kim’s riding up Mt. Baekdu on a white horse could also be viewed in the same context. The results of this Plenary Meeting are likely to have been crafted through a considerable amount of preparation and contemplation. Although those decisions do not seem to cross the ‘red line’ as was feared, it is possible to still go into a downward spiral if the situation on the Korean Peninsula is not actively managed in the future. The period between January and February is expected to

be critical. The momentum of negotiations with the North will be rekindled only when uncertainty gets lifted to some extent, regarding President Trump's impeachment trial in the Senate, the reorganizing of the negotiation team at the U.S. State Department, and the U.S. presidential race. It is necessary for South Korea and the U.S. to announce an active and bold 'message toward North Korea' and 'declaratory measures' that will rekindle the U.S.-North Korea talks during January and February. One of them is an adjustment of the 'ROK-U.S. joint military drill.' The joint military exercise usually takes place around the end of February and early March. Past patterns suggest that South Korea-North Korea and the U.S.-North Korea relations could fall into a mechanism of military tensions. An adjustment of the ROK-U.S. joint military drill will inevitably be a determining factor in managing the circumstances. Three principles (co-prosperity, no-war, and mutual security), announced by President Moon Jae-in at last year's UN General Assembly, should be more boldly proclaimed again, and South Korea should actively propagate the message. It is necessary not to regard the security guarantee solely as issues of the U.S.-North Korea and to identify and declare creative, detailed items of the security guarantee that could be implemented between the South and the North. The following tasks should be explored: formulation and design of the Korean Peninsula-type cooperative security, a fundamental reflection on the paradigm of inter-Korean relations, a practical ROK-U.S. alliance, and a new model of the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise.

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