

Notes on Strategy

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Implementation without strategic thinking strategy is likely to arouse fragmentation, and strategies without implementation are in vain. As strategy and implementation are akin to both sides of a coin, they can only be successful when they are mutually constitutive. Yet it seems that North Korea's reality today seems to be wandering between strategy and implementation, or to vacillate between them. This is because, although the implementation of strategies ought to be willingly and capably fulfilled under balanced conditions, despite North Korea's full willingness, capabilities are not verifiable and necessary conditions are not met. In particular, poor conditions result from dilemma.

Kim Jong Un's New National Strategy Revealed at the Eighth Party Congress

At the Eighth Party Congress held earlier this year, North Korea reviewed the Party's projects that had been carried out after the Seventh Party Congress and outlined its internal and external strategies for the next five years.¹⁾ During the

Congress, Kim Jong Un not only denied the principle of “infallibility of a leader” by admitting to failed economic strategies, but also for the first time since his inauguration presented a blueprint and roadmap of future strategies. Kim Jong Un's unexpected admission and actions suggest that he regards the Eighth Congress as a watershed in his path toward long-term leadership, revealing his determination and firm stance to undoubtedly overcome the crises the regime is facing.

Under this larger scheme Chairman Kim concluded his succession period during which he had to address a set of inherited instructions, and through the Eighth Party Congress opened a new era of governing freed of these restraints and based on new confidence derived from his ten years of experience as a leader. First of all, he set a “path of socialism”, that is, a “path of loving the people,” as a milestone that moved beyond the goals of his grandfather's “path of Juche (self-reliance)” and his father's “path of military-first politics” – paths that he had mimicked at the beginning of his rule. In addition, Kim Jong Un was appointed to the post of General Secretary, an appointment that had been delayed until now, and reorganized the party apparatus and personnel. He elevated the idea of “people-first politics” to the level of his ruling ideology, replacing his father's “military-first politics”, and presented the idea that “the People are Heaven” as a key political slogan.

Furthermore, Kim Jong Un even urged the party leaders in his closing remarks at the Conference of Cell Secretaries held in April to make every effort to improve people's welfare with the determined spirit of the "Arduous March." A letter of special order signed by Chairman Kim (which is assumed to be a letter authorizing the release of reserved wartime supplies) at the Third Plenary Session of the Eighth Party Central Committee held last June was also a part of his commitment to "people-first politics." Likewise, Chairman Kim is utilizing "people-first politics" as a medium through which he is signaling his identifying with the people, controlling the leaders, and stabilizing the regime. He has also emphasized strengthening the governing leadership and control of the party. This political experiment, in which he has boldly severed his regime's ties to Kim Jong Il's ruling principle of a military-first regime, might have been an inevitable legacy for the third-generation leader who is neither a "liberator of the fatherland" nor a "party founder." Presumably, Kim Jong Un as a young leader had a difficult time from the inception of his reign dealing with the wealthy and powerful military and its elderly leaders. Accordingly, it seems that reverting to the Party's original status and role was considered as an effective alternative method to control them.

At the March Plenary Session in 2013, Chairman Kim Jong Un adopted the policy of parallel development (Byungjin) of the economy and nuclear weapons and declared the

completion of his program of building nuclear-weapons power in November 2017. Soon after that, the North proclaimed a policy line at the Third Plenary Session of the Party's Seventh Central Committee in April, 2018 that concentrated all efforts on construction of the economy, and reaffirmed this policy at the Eighth Party Congress. Moreover, North Korea designated this year as a "critical turning point" that could invigorate and determine the outcomes of the five-year strategy for the national economic development plan, while encouraging economic construction through various actions, such as organizing party meetings and new workshops and replacing leaders who were not devoted to their duties. In light of these attempts, Kim Jong Un appears to be as much concerned about an uncertain future derived from economic hardship as from the security vacuum caused by denuclearization. Consequently, Chairman Kim is currently making all-out efforts to achieve the first-year goals of the five-year national economic development plan while focusing on securing the regime's sustainability based on the self-reliance.

The North's concentration on economic construction does not necessarily mean it is relegating national defense to a lower priority. In 2018, North Korea focused on creating favorable external conditions to expedite economic construction. As a result, it opened the door for improving both inter-Korean relations and U.S.-North Korea relations. However, the grand transition process for peace on the Korean Peninsula encountered a barrier in Hanoi. Due to the failed Hanoi deal,

North Korea again promulgated a plan at the Eighth Party Congress to reinforce its nuclear deterrence and modernize its conventional national defense capabilities. Moreover, they released a list of new weapons systems they planned to develop, which was quite unusual given the sensitivity of the issue. Pyongyang insisted such military buildup is a justifiable measure as self-defense to counter the U.S.’ incessant increase of its armaments on the Korean Peninsula. While doing this, North Korea has also consistently highlighted that the ultimate goal of strengthening its defense capabilities is to ensure a peaceful environment for the purpose of fully focusing on its economic development.

Along with these internal measures, Pyongyang adopted a “power versus power and goodwill versus goodwill” strategy toward Washington and a “conditional response” strategy toward Seoul. Both strategies coincide with each other in a way that allows North Korea to appraise the two countries’ attitudes and respond to them accordingly. This implies that the North will subjectively interpret the other’s attitude and behavior, which is not so different from unilateralism. North Korea is taking a tougher stance toward South Korea and the United States owing to its disappointment at the results from the Hanoi Summit. Despite the fact that the Biden administration keeps sending favorable signals, and that the Moon Jae-In administration has repeatedly expressed its intentions to resume dialogue, North Korea has remained silent. Nonetheless, the North has at least left the door open to the possibility of changing its foreign policy, stating that

it would “actively move forward to create favorable outside conditions” at the Third Plenary Session of the Party’s Eighth Central Committee.

All in all, North Korea's internal and external strategy is to normalize the Party's leadership and concentrate its all-out efforts on economic construction and stabilizing the lives of the people while simultaneously, strengthening its defense capabilities and proactively creating favorable external conditions.

Challenges Facing Actual Implementation

Multiple challenges exist in addressing the implementation of Chairman Kim’s strategies. If strategy is the realm of ideals that incorporate goals, then executing strategy belongs to the realm of realities, which includes the conditions for their implementation. North Korea’s current reality seems to be one of limbo. In a Rodong Sinmun article published on April 24, North Korea expressed this difficult reality, stating “The challenges and obstacles that currently lie ahead of us are literally unfathomable and more severe than ever.” The challenges and obstacles the regime faces include: its lack of foreign currency reserves and the reduced level of social endurance and regime durability due to the prolonged sanctions against it; border closure due to COVID-19 and the resulting sharp decrease in foreign trade; annually occurring severe natural disasters; and non-socialist and anti-socialist sentiment in conjunction with the peoples’ persistent

discontent. In particular, Rodong Sinmun, the official newspaper of North Korea's Workers' Party, has been raising the alarm about the necessity for quarantining to protect against Covid-19 by its daily reporting, including a series on the spread of COVID-19 in global society. Additionally, at an enlarged meeting of the Second Political Bureau of the Eighth Central Committee held in June, the North shuffled personnel at the Politburo Standing Committee, the Political Bureau and the Secretariat and demoted those responsible for a serious incident that occurred during quarantine.

Given the above difficult reality, it is questionable whether or not the North's plans to usher in new strategies for economic construction that rely on self-rehabilitation can be achieved, bringing into stark focus questions of implementation. While Pyongyang pours all of its insufficient resources and materials into economic construction, at the same time it is also irrationally and ambitiously aiming to strengthen its national defense capabilities. The North has been compelling its officials and its people to seek "secret skills" for economic construction. It is also strongly disseminating a message reminding the people that "You have no right to die before you accomplish your mission." Pyongyang's use of these methods and messages will not solve their difficult problems since they are overly reliant on mobilization mechanisms and only seek the driving force for strategic implementation in internal factors, as they also did in the 1990s during the "Arduous March." To rephrase this, North Korea may barely manage to survive without taking

exceptional measures needed to compromise with its external conditions, which include a response to the resolution of the nuclear issue, but it will be difficult to expect any meaningful developments in the absence of any such measures. Nevertheless, the possibility of improving both inter-Korean and U.S.-North Korea relations is becoming increasingly uncertain. Not only are the boundaries and criteria vague for the North's understanding of "power" and "goodwill" in its principles of "power versus power" and "goodwill versus goodwill" in its dealings with Washington and Seoul, but its demands for "giving up hostile U.S. policies" toward North Korea and "resolving fundamental problems" are also overly arbitrary and unilateral. Accordingly, there is a possibility that for the time being North Korea might passively respond to demands for dialogue from South Korea and the U.S. And, even if the North embraces dialogue, that does not necessarily mean it has any serious intent to make substantial progress. North Korea ought to abandon its current illusory approach and strategy, and instead, move forward with a practical approach that would enable it to accommodate a policy line (strategy) of concentrating its all-out efforts on economic construction. It should especially promptly embrace the dialogues and diplomacy that have been roadmapped through the South Korea-U.S. Summit and capture these rare opportunities. This is not only the way to secure peace on the Korean Peninsula, but is also the way to carry out its most urgent task—economic revival.

At the Third Plenary Session of the Eighth Party Central Committee held on June 17, Chairman Kim Jong Un responded for the first time since the inauguration of the Biden administration to the U.S.’ diplomatic signal. Notably, Chairman Kim hinted at his willingness for a peaceful resolution by highlighting “stable management of the situation on the Korean Peninsula” while at the same time, mentioning “preparation for both dialogue and confrontation.” It is particularly intriguing that he borrowed the South Korean expression of “stable management of the situation on the Korean Peninsula.” While Chairman Kim Jong Un institutionally reinforced his system of monolithic leadership through the Eighth Party Congress, he should be cautious about increasing the levels of distortion, manipulation, and risk that will inevitably occur by dictatorially employing excessive mobilization and control of the people if he practices his hegemonic domination based on this institutionally strengthened party leadership. These reasons constitute why renewed and thorough research on Kim Jong Un’s behavior needs to be conducted.

Any country’s execution of strategy requires quite sophisticated thought and debate. The expression of willingness to implement a plan may be a slogan that supplies “self-comfort,” but it cannot be a motto for “self-development.” In addition, the collective cohesiveness of a country’s citizens is a crucially important factor in its capacity to execute its plans; and mobilizing a country’s material capabilities is as significant as mobilizing its

political power. However, material capabilities can only be obtained when they fulfill environmental conditions.

Consequently, the ability to mobilize external resources is needed in order to compensate for internal deficiencies. It is exactly at this point where North Korea is struggling between strategy and implementation. This situation indicates the cleavage between its ability and the conditions with which it must deal. Attempts to interpret and alter the external environment through its self-centered logic cannot be the North's solution to its problems because its external relations are verbatim "relationships."

Recent geopolitical currents affecting the Korean Peninsula also seem atypical. On the one hand, instead of cooperation between the United States and China, the possibility of competition and conflict between them is increasing. On the other hand, while the South Korea-U.S. alliance deepens, the relationship between North Korea and China is becoming closer as well. The time has arrived to actively respond to and manage these geopolitical changes. Mutual contacts and exchanges between the two Koreas are essential to the process of promoting the peace process on the Korean Peninsula, and regardless of the type and format of contact, it is worth making every effort to increase and expand opportunities between them. This is the most indispensable condition for North Korea's own development strategies and execution strategies.