



# North Korea's 9<sup>th</sup> Party Congress Report



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# I. Background and Characteristics

## 1. Overview

- Date: February 19<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup>, 2026
- Characteristics: Presentation of future operational direction of nation
- Goal: Present overall assessment of the implemented policies for the last five-years and future direction for nation

The 9th Party Congress focused on presenting the future direction of state governance in the political, military, and economic spheres, while also addressing the traditional agenda items of a Party Congress. This includes the election of Party leadership, organizational restructuring, and the presentation of major policy directions.

In particular, this Congress marked the end of the era of rule based on Kim Il Sung-Kim Jong Il's authority and legacy, and served as the turning point for the launch of what can be described as Kim Jong Un regime 2.0, in both name and substance. This signifies that Kim Jong Un's own ideas and governing discourse have become the sole guiding principles of state administration, and suggests that his independent style of rule has entered its final stage of consolidation, which is grounded by the stability of the regime.

## **2. Background**

- Overall assessment of policies implemented for the last five-years following the 8th Party Congress
- Ongoing international sanctions and economic difficulties
- Readjustment of national security strategies in response to strengthening of nuclear and missile weapons
- Emphasis of regime stability amid changes in international relations was essential

Since the beginning of the Kim Jong Un regime, North Korea has held a Party Congress every five years. The Party Congress functions as the highest political event where they assess the results of policy implementation during the previous period and present strategies for future governance.

The 9th Party Congress was convened at a time when North Korea was facing a range of internal and external challenges. Amid the continued international sanctions, economic difficulties persisted while the country's external relations were unfolding within an increasingly complex political environment. Under these circumstances, the North Korean leadership needed to solidify the future direction of state governance while emphasizing regime stability and policy continuity.

In addition, during the previous period, North Korea had been readjusting its national security strategy through strengthening its nuclear and missile capabilities as well as advancing its military power. These changes carried important implications of its strategy for national security and needed to be implemented politically through the Party Congress to present for future policy direction.

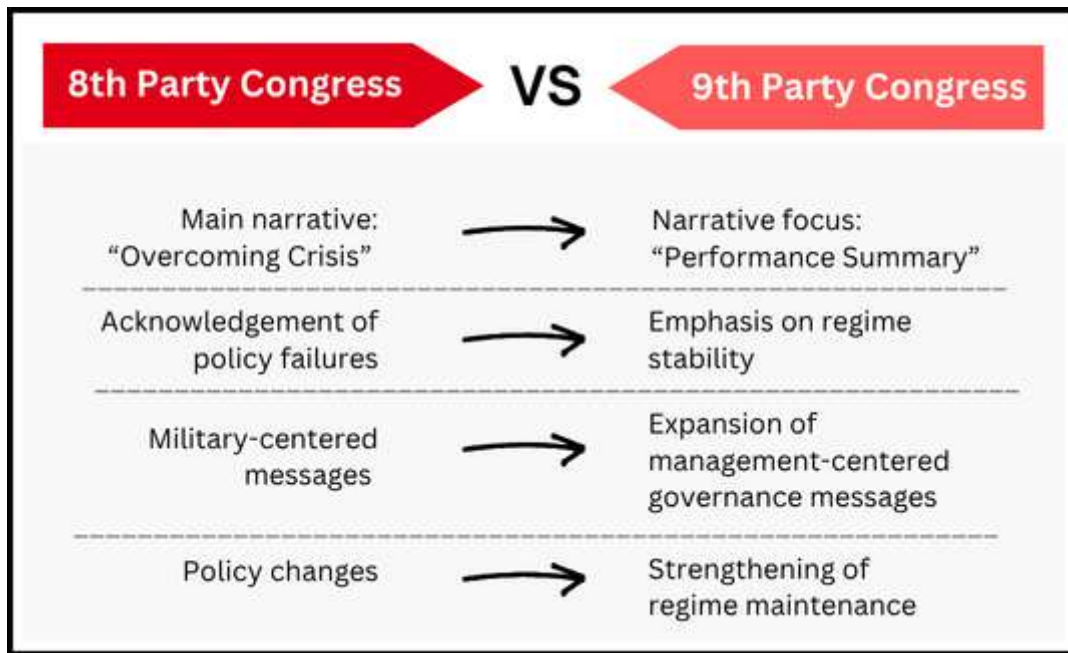
### **3. Characteristics**

- Consolidation of existing policies rather than shifting policy direction
- Emphasis on regime's stability and policy achievements
- Strengthening of party-centered governance system
- Expansion of a management-centered governing system

The 9th Party Congress is best understood as a political event, characterized less by the presentation of new policy, but as an effort to readjust the existing governance based on results of policy implementation during the previous period.

In particular, the Congress was marked by a strong emphasis on regime stability and policy achievements. North Korean leadership described the previous period as one that had "opened a transformative phase", highlighting both the stability of the regime and the accomplishments of policy implementation. This represents a notable shift when compared with the 8th Party Congress, at which economic problems and policy limitations were acknowledged to a certain extent.

Another key feature of this Congress was the strengthening of the party-centered governing system and the expansion of functions for managing policy implementation. Changes in leadership appointment and organizational structure indicated a clear future trend toward reinforcing policy execution and management of party officials through Party organizations.



The 9th Party Congress shows clear differences from the 8th Party Congress held in 2021 in several aspects. The 8th Party Congress was characterized by the acknowledgment of the limitations of economic policy and the difficulties of state governance, with an emphasis on breakthroughs and overcoming crises. On the other hand, the 9th Party Congress stood out for its portrayal of the previous period as one with several achievements as well as for its strong emphasis on regime stability and policy accomplishments.

The 8th Party Congress referred directly to the failure of economic policy and to structural problems, whereas the 9th Party Congress repeatedly referred to the previous period as a "transformative phase", in order to stress the achievements of the regime. This shift in tone suggests that the North Korean leadership believes it has currently secured stability of the regime to a certain degree.

Differences in messages regarding policy also were present. While the 8th Party Congress focused on readjusting policy direction as well as emphasizing both economic development strategy and strengthening of military power, the 9th Party Congress was characterized less by the presentation of new policy but by

the reviewing of results for existing policy implementation and the reorganization of the governing system.

A certain change was also evident in the governance system. At the 9th Party Congress, it was confirmed that they are working toward strengthening policy execution and management of party officials through Party organizations, which may be interpreted as a move to further reinforce a management-centered system of rule.

## **II. Politics: Restructuring of Power Dynamics and Changes in the Governance System**

### **1. Leadership personnel changes and generational transitions**

- Partial replacement of senior leadership
- Placement of operational management officials
- Partial adjustment of the influence of military-affiliated personnel

One of the most notable features of leadership appointments at the 9th Party Congress was generational change. Some of the older veteran officials stepped down, while those with practical administrative experience or are comparatively younger were moved into more prominent positions, resulting in a visible change in the composition of leadership. However, at the same time this change appears to be less of an abrupt power restructuring or large-scale purge, and more of a gradual personnel adjustment carried out while maintaining overall regime

stability. Other analyses have assessed the reshuffle as a change marked largely by generational replacement.

A particularly noteworthy point is the readjustment of the status of military figures. Diminishment of the presence of key military elites within the Party, including Ri Pyong Chol and Pak Jong Chon, is an indication of the shift of power for these positions. This may be interpreted as a sign that the governing structure is moving away from a military-centered mode of power management and toward a system in which the military is controlled through Party organizations.

Another important change was the expansion of the Party Secretariat. The Secretariat was reorganized from an eight member structure into a twelve member structure, which may be understood as the intention to concentrate policy coordination and strategic management functions more firmly under Party control. In other words, this change can be seen, not simply as the rise of particular individuals, but as part of an effort to institutionalize and further refine a Party centered system of governance.

It is also worth noting that key figures in the economic, organizational, and external affairs sectors continued to retain important roles. Kim Jae Ryong, Ri Il Hwan, and Kim Song Nam are figures who have maintained the leadership's trust through their work in organizational control, propaganda and mass organizations, and external affairs, respectively. In particular, due to Kim Jae Ryong's experience in both the Cabinet and Party organizations, his role can be assessed as a key managerial official who places great emphasis on policy execution, field control, and performance management. Meanwhile, Ri Il Hwan may be understood as a key player in the areas of propaganda and ideological control. This aligns with Kim Jong Un's personnel management style, which seeks to reinforce control through mutual checks and parallel lines of operation.

The appointment of party officials at the 9th Party Congress can be understood as having further strengthened a Party-led managerial system of governance centered on Kim Jong Un through generational replacement, readjustment of

military influence, and expansion of experienced Party officials. In other words, these appointments are not a product of power instability, but as part of a process in which the Kim Jong Un regime is refining and further institutionalizing its governing structure, on the basis of its stability.

## **2. Strengthening of the party-centered governing system and expansion of the Secretariat's role**

- Strengthening of party's policy enforcement and management
- Strengthening of personnel and inspection systems
- Clarification of structure for responsibility of policy implementation

Another important change at the 9th Party Congress was the strengthening of the Party-centered system of governance. North Korea has long claimed to operate under a structure in which the Party leads the state and the military, but this Congress made it especially clear that this principle was being reinforced in a more institutionalized manner. The change can be assessed as not simply an organizational restructuring, but as a broader realignment of governing because priority was placed on the Party's direct coordination and control over the relative autonomy of the military and Cabinet.

The most noteworthy aspect was the personnel appointment to the Secretariat. At this Congress, the Secretariat was expanded to a twelve member structure with a considerable number of those appointed being new. This may be interpreted not as supplementation of personnel, but as an effort by Kim Jong Un to strengthen his grip on governance by placing at the forefront a new group of Party officials and administrative elites directly connected to him. In other words, these appointments may be understood as an intention to cultivate a new generation of elites under Kim Jong Un's direct authority and to strengthen the Party's capacity for policy implementation through them.

The functional significance of the Secretariat is also important. If the Politburo determines the overall direction of major policies and the Party, the Secretariat is the core institution that manages the implementation of those decisions at the level of actual organization and policy execution. Accordingly, the Secretariat is expected to assume a more expanded role in strategic policy coordination and advisory. Ultimately, the expansion of the Secretariat may be understood as an indication that the Party intends to hold a direct grip on the post decision implementation process, control of party officials, and sectoral coordination.

This Secretariat-centered system of governance has the effect of increasing accountability in the process of policy execution, while at the same time allowing central control to be enforced more strongly down to the local level and across individual institutions. In particular, if functions related to party official management and organizational control are strengthened, it becomes possible to monitor implementation more strictly at the local and field levels and to manage both loyalty and performance within a single structure.

In conclusion, this Party Congress may be evaluated as a turning point that went beyond merely bringing the Party back to the forefront, but instead further consolidating a managerial system of governance centered on the Party Secretariat under Kim Jong Un's leadership.

### **3. Reorganization of a supreme leader-centered political structure**

- Stabilization of power structure centered on the supreme leader
- Management of symbolic politics and regime legitimacy
- Institutional maintenance of a power-centered structure

The changes on the political structure revealed at the 9th Party Congress are ultimately connected to an effort to maintain a leader centered system of

governance in a more stable manner. Both the leadership appointments and the reorganization of the institutional structure may be understood as measures designed to preserve a power structure centered on the supreme leader in a stable way.

The North Korean political system is fundamentally characterized by a concentration of power around the supreme leader. At this Party Congress, various measures emerged that were aimed at increasing institutional stability while maintaining that power structure. The strengthening of policy implementation management through Party organizations and the reorganization of the system of responsibility delegation for party officials may be seen as part of a governing mechanism intended to preserve the supreme leader's power more securely and consistently.

At the same time, a certain degree of change can also be observed in the management of political symbolism. Symbolic politics emphasizing the authority of the leader and the legitimacy of the regime continues to be actively employed, and this functions as an important element in maintaining the political stability of the North Korean government.

### **III. National Security and Foreign Policy Strategy: Nuclear-Based Strategy and Direction for Foreign Policy**

## **1. Declaration as a nuclear-armed state and advancement of strategic weapons**

- Emphasis of achievement on development of nuclear weapons
- Clarification of strategic status of nuclear forces
- Emphasizing nuclear weapons are strategically for national security

At the 9th Party Congress, North Korea made it unmistakably clear that nuclear force stands at the center of its national security strategy and that its status as a nuclear-armed state has reached an irreversible stage. Other analyses have likewise assessed this Congress as a turning point that further institutionalized North Korea's identity as a nuclear-armed state.

If the 8th Party Congress was where North Korea presented the direction for the development of its nuclear force and strategic weapons, the 9th Party Congress was the stage at which it emphasized the completion and entrenchment of its status as a nuclear-armed state. In other words, North Korea advanced beyond speaking of the progress of nuclear development and made it clear that it now intends to treat nuclear force as a fixed premise of its national security.

North Korea regards nuclear force not simply as one component of military power, but as a core means of guaranteeing regime security. At this Congress as well, the narrative justifying the strengthening of nuclear and military power was repeatedly argued through references to the hostile policy of the United States and the instability of the international order. This suggests that nuclear weapons are highly likely to continue functioning as the standard means for North Korea's international policy and overall national security.

This nuclear centered perception in turn leads directly to the advancement of strategic weapons capabilities and towards military modernization. The 9th Party Congress reaffirmed the modernization of both nuclear and conventional forces, and is assessed as having presented the continued development of long range

missiles and various strategic weapons systems, as well as the strengthening of nuclear based deterrence, as key tasks for the future.

In particular, military modernization should be understood not simply as an effort to increase the quantity of weapons, but as a move to enhance the overall response capability and operational system of the military with nuclear power as its central source. North Korea's recent display of tactical nuclear operational capability and its missile tests are also connected to this development, revealing an intention to strengthen an integrated deterrence structure that combines nuclear and conventional forces.

Ultimately the 9th Party Congress shows that negotiations will no longer start with denuclearization as a key factor but instead pursue a new strategic framework premised on the condition that North Korea is acknowledged as a nuclear-armed state. Going forward, North Korea is likely to prefer frameworks such as arms control among nuclear powers, risk management, and the adjustment of military tensions, rather than negotiations over nuclear abandonment. At the same time, it is also likely to continue actively using the achievements of nuclear arms development as a means of internal consolidation and of demonstrating the leadership's accomplishments.

## **2. Establishment of structural strategies against South Korea**

- Change of perspective regarding North-South Korea relations
- Strategically managed tension with South Korea
- Possibility of simultaneous political and military pressure

At the 9th Party Congress, North Korea reaffirmed its position on the "two-state" framework regarding South Korea. North Korea had already abandoned the idea of inter-Korean relations and defined their relationship to be between two separate states. This Congress further reinforced this argument in a much

stronger manner. In particular, in the concluding remarks of the Congress, Kim Jong Un described South Korea as the most hostile entity and declared that they will no longer be referred to be categorized as of the same state. This may be understood not as mere rhetoric, but as a political declaration that North Korea intends to completely depart from the previous framework that treated inter-Korean relations as an issue of a ethnic community.

This change shows that North Korea is shifting toward managing its policy regarding South Korea in a more cold and calculated manner, and no longer being an extension of reunification or an inter-Korean issue. In other words, South Korea is being positioned not as a counterpart for cooperation and integration, but as a separate state to be managed in terms of security and foreign affairs.

At the same time, this strict stance toward South Korea does not necessarily mean a simple one sided break. North Korea is likely to continue employing a strategy that combines the creation of tension with the possibility of dialogue in inter-Korean relations. This means applying pressure by heightening military tensions or using harsh rhetoric, while also making use of such pressure, when necessary, to shift toward a negotiating phase or to manage external messaging.

Going forward, North Korea is highly likely to continue treating inter-Korean relations, not through the lens of ethnic symbolism, but from the perspectives of security, diplomacy, and regime management. In that process, it is also likely to maintain a dual strategy that makes use of both the creation of tension and negotiating space.

### **3. North Korea-China-Russia cooperation based international strategies**

- Strengthening of relations between North Korea and Russia
- Maintaining strategic relations with China
- Utilize other diplomatic environments

Amongst the recent changes in the international political sphere, North Korea has been showing a greater willingness to make active use of its relations with China and Russia. At the same time, in the official report of the 9th Party Congress, China and Russia were hardly mentioned directly. A number of analyses have interpreted this not as a sign of weakening ties, but rather as an indication that there was little need to publicly showcase an already significantly strengthened relations.

Relations with Russia, in particular, are emerging as an important strategic variable. Recently, North Korea's ties with Russia have expanded beyond simple diplomatic cooperation into a substantive alignment in the military, security, and economic spheres. This carries major significance for North Korea as it seeks to secure a new base of support and greater strategic space even under international sanctions and external pressure. The growing closeness between North Korea and Russia can be understood both as a means for North Korea to gain stronger leverage against a pressure structure led by the United States and the West, and as an effort to maximize its own geopolitical value amid changes in the international security order.

North Korea's relationship with China is somewhat different from its relationship with Russia. Rather than displaying the kind of rapid political alignment seen in North Korea's ties with Russia, the relationship with China is closer to a pattern of more stable restoration and utilization in the areas of the economy, trade, supply chains, and border management. This may be understood as part of North

Korea's effort to restore relations with China in a pragmatic manner and maintain diplomatic balance.

Ultimately, in an increasingly multipolar international political environment, North Korea appears to be pursuing a strategy aimed not at depending on any single country, but at widening its diplomatic options by making use of China and Russia in different ways. Russia tends to function as the axis of security and strategic alignment, while China serves more as the axis of economic support and a stable rear base. In this respect, North Korea's foreign policy after the 9th Party Congress is likely to develop beyond a simple confrontation framework and move in the direction of securing both strategic autonomy and negotiating space within a complex international environment.

#### **4. Conditional relations with U.S. and possible negotiations**

- Propose that the U.S. withdraws hostile policies as a prerequisite for improvement of relations
- Reaffirming original claim that blames the U.S. for the change in relations with North Korea
- Maintaining position to directly deal with U.S. rather than through South Korea

At the 9th Party Congress, North Korea maintained a hard stance toward the United States while at the same time conveying that relations could improve under certain conditions. Kim Jong Un stated that there would be no reason for the United States and North Korea not to have good relations if the U.S. respected North Korea's present status and withdrew its hostile policy, thereby reaffirming the position that the future of U.S.–North Korea relations depends entirely on the attitude of the United States. This framing is consistent with outside analyses of the Congress, which note that North Korea continued to invoke U.S. hostile policy while leaving

limited room for conditional engagement.

This repeated North Korea's longstanding logic of placing responsibility for any change in bilateral relations on the United States, while also signaling that the possibility of dialogue remains open if U.S. policy changes. At the same time, however, the premise is effectively that the United States would have to acknowledge North Korea's status as a nuclear weapons state, which are far heftier conditions than in the past. That interpretation aligns with recent assessments that North Korea has further entrenched its irreversible nuclear status and is no longer treating denuclearization as the starting point for negotiations.

This position also shows that North Korea still sees the United States, rather than South Korea, as its primary negotiating counterpart. In fact, while the 9th Party Congress displayed strong hostility toward South Korea, it delivered a different message toward the United States by referring to the possibility of improving relations, however under specific conditions.

Going forward, U.S.–North Korea negotiations are more likely to develop not on the premise of denuclearization but in the form of arms control or tension management with the underlying condition of acknowledging North Korea as a nuclear-armed state.

#### **IV. Economics: Evaluation of the Five-Year Plan and Regional Development**

## **1. Implications of a “successful completion” of the Five-Year Plan**

- Emphasis on economic policy achievements and such narrative
- Purpose of ensuring continuance of policies
- Strong political messages

North Korea assessed the results of the Five-Year Plan for Economic Development presented at the 8th Party Congress as basically having been fulfilled. Compared with cases in which some previous Party Congresses acknowledged the limitations of economic policy, this assessment may be regarded as relatively positive.

This assessment appears to be less an objective evaluation reflecting actual economic conditions but rather a political message in nature. The North Korean leadership may be seen as having presented a narrative that highlighted policy achievements by emphasizing that economic policy implementation had produced a certain degree of success despite a range of difficult circumstances, including external sanctions and natural disasters.

This message also carries internal political significance in that it emphasizes the leadership’s capacity to implement policy and highlights the stability of the regime.

## **2. 20x10 Policy for Regional Development**

- Policies that strengthen the economic foundation of regions
- Goal of narrowing regional developmental disparities
- Emphasis on improving lives of citizens

One of the economic policies emphasized at the 9th Party Congress was the

strategy for regional development. The North Korean leadership presented the improvement of the industrial base and living conditions in local areas as an important task within the national economic strategy. Recent analyses of the Congress likewise note that regional development was placed near the top of the economic agenda.

The 20×10 Policy for Regional Development may be understood as a policy designed to strengthen the economic foundations of local areas and promote regional development over a set period of time. More specifically, other analyses describe it as a long term initiative to build or expand local industrial capacity in twenty cities and counties each year over a ten year period, with the stated aim of improving living standards outside the capital, Pyongyang. In this sense, the policy can be seen as an attempt to move away from a capital centered development structure and expand the basis for greater self reliance in local economies.

The regional development policy also carries political significance in addition to its economic meaning. The message emphasizing improvements of living conditions of residents in provincial areas is closely connected to a policy objective of maintaining regime support among the population and strengthening internal cohesion. Analysts have likewise interpreted the policy as one that serves not only economic goals but also the regime's broader effort to bolster legitimacy through visible improvements in local livelihoods.

### **3. Strengthening of the state-operated economic system**

- Emphasis on cabinet-centered economic management system
- Strengthening of policy enforcement management
- Emphasis on scientific, evidence-based planning

The 9th Party Congress also revealed a policy direction aimed at strengthening the management system in the course of implementing economic policy. North Korean leadership emphasized the scientific formulation of plans and the accountability of policy execution in the process of carrying out economic policy.

In particular, the Congress showed an emphasis on the role of the Cabinet in the implementation of economic policy. The Cabinet-centered system of economic management may be understood as a structure intended to strengthen accountability in the policy execution process and to improve the efficiency of implementation.

It is also worth noting that the Congress emphasized the scientific management of the economic administration system and the strengthening of statistical management. This may be seen as an attempt to introduce a more systematic method of management into the process of policy implementation.

## V. Overall Evaluation and Outlook

- Party Congress focused on regime management rather than policy changes
- Strengthening of party-centered governance and management functions
- Continuance of nuclear-based national security strategies
- Maintaining economic management system and coexistence of structural restrictions

The 9th Party Congress is best understood as a political event characterized less by the presentation of a new policy direction for the North Korean government, but by the effort to consolidate the results of policy implementation during the previous period and to readjust the existing governing structure. The Congress was marked by a strong emphasis on regime stability and policy continuity, and it confirmed a policy direction aimed at strengthening management functions across the political, military, economic, and social spheres.

In particular, changes in leadership appointments and organizational structure revealed a clear trend toward reinforcing policy execution and management of party officials through Party organizations. These changes suggest that North Korea's governing system is gradually shifting from a military-centered structure toward a Party led system centered on management and control.

In terms of security strategy, it is highly likely that a state strategy centered on nuclear force will continue. The North Korean leadership presented the development of nuclear capability as a core element of its national security strategy and emphasized it as an important means of guaranteeing regime security. This strategy is also likely to serve as an important guiding principle in North Korea's future external policy.

In the economic sphere, the leadership evaluated policy implementation over the past five years as having produced a certain degree of achievement and emphasized the continuity of the policy. At the same time, however, the constraints facing the North Korean economy, including the international sanctions environment and the structural limitations of its industrial base, remain important variables. Under these conditions, the North Korean leadership is likely to maintain a policy direction focused on preserving the existing economic system while strengthening management functions, rather than pursuing abrupt economic reform.

Overall, the 9th Party Congress is more accurately assessed not as a political event declaring a major shift in policy line, but as a Party Congress characterized by an effort to reorganize the existing method of regime governance and to emphasize stability. Especially, the strengthening of the Party-centered governing system, the continued maintenance of a nuclear based security strategy, and the operation of a management centered economy are all likely to remain major features of the North Korean system going forward.

Meanwhile, the reactions inside North Korea and the subsequent changes confirmed so far remain limited, and the actual impact of this Party Congress is likely to become clearer over time. In that sense, the evaluation of the 9th Party Congress is not yet complete, and it will be necessary to continue tracking the actual patterns of policy implementation that emerge inside North Korea, as well as the responses of residents and party officials.

Daily NK and the AND Center will continue to monitor the impact of the 9th Party Congress and its subsequent developments through reporting from inside North Korea, and on that basis will produce more detailed follow-up reports.