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Executive Summary

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Assessing North Korea's situation through Kim Jong Un's Public Appearances in 2025

Han Ki-bum, Adjunct Senior Fellow

Su Bo Bae, Research Associate

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Kim Jong Un's publicly reported appearances have expanded significantly in recent years. From approximately seventy appearances in 2021, when the Eighth Party Congress convened, the frequency remained around one hundred in both 2022 and 2023 before rising to 130 in 2024 and further to 153 in 2025. In sectoral terms, appearances in 2025 were concentrated in the military domain (over fifty instances), followed by economic and political domains (each exceeding thirty), while external engagements exceeded twenty appearances—more than doubling compared with the previous year.

Although Kim's appearances remained centered on military affairs, their relatively balanced distribution across sectors appears closely associated with deepening alignment with Russia. External diplomatic engagement and visits to munitions facilities increased accordingly, while improved economic latitude enabled regional development initiatives, leading to more frequent inspections of construction sites. Restoration of relations with China, numerous political commemorations, and the concluding phase of the national "Five-Year Economic Development Plan" further contributed to an intensive leadership schedule throughout 2025.

Against this backdrop, four defining characteristics can be identified. *First*, Kim continued placing significant emphasis on military-sector appearances aimed at encouraging weapons production and technological advancement while pursuing parallel development of nuclear and conventional forces.

Second, the regional development policy expanded beyond local industrial factories to include provincial hospitals and large greenhouse complexes, concentrating economic-sector appearances on construction inspections.

Third, by presiding over major commemorative events, including the eightieth anniversaries of national liberation and party founding, Kim intensified symbolic mobilization through ritual practices such as national flag ceremonies, loyalty pledges, and mass celebratory performances, while repeatedly stressing the concept of “Inminseong” (Inmin-ness)—meaning the “character of the communist devoted to the people”—in policy execution.

Fourth, signs of restored relations with China surrounding the September Victory Day commemorations, alongside summit diplomacy with Laos and Vietnam, contributed to a notable increase in external appearances.

Taken together, Kim’s public appearances suggest a regime-management approach that treats geopolitical turbulence and great-power competition as favorable strategic conditions. These conditions are leveraged to secure economic inflows, expand military and diplomatic support structures, and reinforce internal cohesion by framing inter-Korean relations in adversarial terms. Despite the forthcoming Ninth Party Congress, no substantive deviation from this externally leveraged “comprehensive revitalization” strategy is expected; rather, the regime is likely to intensify efforts to secure tangible gains before strategic conditions deteriorate. Accordingly, South Korea should strengthen coordination with neighboring states to reduce incentives for North Korean provocation, prepare for potential manipulation of the security environment—including declarations concerning maritime boundary lines in the West Sea—and develop responses addressing distortions likely to emerge from expansion-driven development models lacking institutional reform.

Distribution of Kim Jong Un’s Public Appearances in 2025

Kim Jong Un conducted 153 public appearances in 2025, an increase of twenty-three compared with 2024 and substantially higher than in 2022 and 2023. Sectoral distribution consisted of 51 military appearances, 37 economic appearances, 34 political appearances, 26 external appearances, and 5 social appearances, reflecting increased inspections of construction sites, presiding over political ceremonies, and diplomatic engagement.

In temporal terms, appearances in the first half of the year were concentrated in economic and military sectors, whereas second-half appearances diversified across domains due to political commemorations and intensified diplomatic engagement, including interactions with foreign visitors attending anniversary events.

Over the past five years, a notable trend has been the revitalization of leadership visibility beginning around July 2023, centered on the encouragement of munitions production. This renewed activism appears closely linked to deepening military cooperation with Russia, which contributed to increased external appearances and industrial inspections while facilitating regional development initiatives. By 2025, restoration of relations with China and the concluding phase of national planning objectives further reinforced this active leadership posture.

Kim Jong Un also increasingly appeared publicly alongside his daughter, Kim Ju-ae, with frequency rising steadily since late 2022. The scope of accompaniment expanded from military and economic sectors to external diplomatic contexts. Such appearances may be interpreted as reinforcing leadership legitimacy through messaging oriented toward future generations and socialist collective-family symbolism, while also prompting speculation regarding early preparation for hereditary succession. Nevertheless, dynastic symbolism is consistent with structural characteristics of personalist authoritarian governance, and it would be premature to treat succession as an immediate policy variable.

Table 1. Classification of Kim Jong Un’s Public Appearances (2025)

Category	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Politics	2	1	-	-	2	1	4	5	2	7	5	5	34
Military	3	4	4	4	7	2	2	7	7	3	2	6	51
Economy	1	5	2	2	-	3	2	3	3	3	4	9	37
Society	2	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	5
External	-	-	1	-	1	3	2	3	7	8	-	1	26
Total	8	10	8	6	10	9	10	18	20	21	11	22	153
Reference: Public Appearances in 2024	Military 53, Economy 28, Politics 28, External Affairs 11, Society 10 (Total: 130)												
Frequency of Public Appearances by Year:	2020: 54 times, 2021: 78 times, 2022: 99 times, 2023: 107 times, 2024: 130 times												

Source: Compiled by the author based on North Korean media reports

Sectoral Characteristics of Public Appearances

Political Domain

Kim Jong Un’s political-domain appearances in 2025 totaled six instances during the first half of the year, including three meetings of the Workers’ Party, but increased nearly fivefold to twenty-eight in the second half. This expansion was driven largely by commemorative events, including the seventy-second anniversary of Victory Day (27 July), the eightieth anniversary of national liberation (15 August), the state founding anniversary (9 September), and the eightieth anniversary of party founding (10 October).

A defining feature of these political events was intensified symbolic manipulation aimed at reinforcing state identity and cultivating “our state-first” consciousness. Ritual practices such as flag-raising ceremonies and loyalty pledges were institutionalized, while commemorations honoring fallen soldiers deployed abroad were conducted to encourage patriotic sentiment and loyalty among the population. These efforts appear intended to mobilize “nationwide patriotic enthusiasm” and “mass heroism” in preparation for the Ninth Party Congress.

Kim also placed heightened rhetorical emphasis on the “Inminseong”(Inmin-ness) nature of policy in public speeches. Historically, such emphasis has served leadership legitimacy narratives, mobilization objectives, or responses to perceived public discontent. The notable prioritization of “Inminseong” rather than party discipline during the final phase of the Five-Year Plan may suggest concerns regarding social sentiment and regime confidence in policy outcomes.

Economic Domain

Kim’s economic-domain appearances totaled thirty-seven instances, with thirteen occurring in the first half and twenty-four in the second. The majority consisted of construction-site inspections, particularly visits to hospital construction projects, greenhouse agricultural complexes in Sinuiju, and aquaculture facilities.

A notable shift was the reduced emphasis on local industrial factory construction, suggesting a possible recalibration of policy focus. The regional development initiative expanded from light-industry production capacity toward infrastructure supporting food supply and healthcare. This shift warrants continued monitoring to determine whether prior industrial initiatives failed to produce anticipated outcomes.

Kim publicly acknowledged resource and material constraints during economic guidance visits on multiple occasions, including calls for increased cement production and criticism of construction delays at manufacturing facilities. These remarks suggest that the regime’s large-scale infrastructure push under the banner of “comprehensive revitalization” may be generating implementation inefficiencies, including resource shortages and construction quality concerns.

Military Domain

Military-domain appearances totaled fifty-one instances, divided relatively evenly between the first and second halves of the year. These engagements primarily emphasized weapons development, encouragement and military capability demonstration.

Despite fewer short-range ballistic missile launches compared with previous periods, Kim showcased advanced weapons systems through exhibitions and parades marking major commemorations. These displays highlighted modernization efforts, including developments in airpower and long-range strike capabilities.

Kim simultaneously emphasized development of both nuclear-capable delivery systems and conventional platforms—including naval assets, armored systems, electronic warfare equipment, and unmanned technologies—while signaling that parallel advancement of nuclear and conventional forces would likely be formally articulated at the Ninth Party Congress.

External Domain

The most pronounced shift in 2025 was the expansion of external-domain appearances. These engagements increased fourfold from the first half of the year to the second and diversified beyond Russia-centered activity. Kim’s diplomatic engagements included summit meetings with Chinese leadership, expanded coordination with Russia, and outreach to Southeast

Asian partners such as Laos and Vietnam. These interactions indicate efforts to reinforce trilateral alignment among North Korea, China, and Russia while simultaneously broadening diplomatic engagement across the region.

Relations with the United States were characterized by strategic ambiguity, as Pyongyang declined dialogue overtures while avoiding overt escalation. Inter-Korean relations, by contrast, were framed explicitly in adversarial terms, with Seoul positioned outside the scope of engagement.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Outlook for Public Appearances in 2026

Kim Jong Un's active pattern of public appearances is expected to continue in 2026. At the beginning of the year, he participated in ceremonial activities, including encouragement visits to exemplary workers, families of overseas-deployed commanders, youth construction participants, and students, as well as commemorative visits to national memorial sites accompanied by his daughter. Beyond these ceremonial engagements, continued emphasis on concluding the Five-Year Plan and preparations for the Ninth Party Congress are likely to generate sustained leadership visibility.

Historical precedent suggests the Party Congress process will include extended leadership chairing of multi-day sessions, ideological training for participants, celebratory cultural events, military parades, and extensive commemorative photography with participants. Following the Congress, provincial mobilization rallies, institutional meetings, workplace pledge gatherings, and cadre training sessions are expected to reinforce the implementation of Congress decisions.

Accordingly, the first half of 2026 will likely be characterized by dense political meeting activity and organizational mobilization. Unlike the more restrained leadership posture observed several years earlier, sustained cooperation with Russia and the regime's framing of accelerated "comprehensive revitalization" are likely to encourage continued assertive leadership visibility.

Analytical Implications of Public Appearances Patterns

Four structural tendencies are expected to persist: *First*, military-domain appearances will continue to occupy substantial weight as the regime advances parallel nuclear and conventional force development. External revenue generation through arms exports and overseas deployments may support domestic military modernization. Prolongation of this military prioritization could generate distortions in resource allocation and exacerbate internal policy tensions, resembling structural side effects observed under earlier military-first governance models.

Second, frequent construction-site appearances are expected to continue under expanded regional development and urban construction initiatives. Infrastructure expansion across

provincial and metropolitan areas is likely to remain a visible centerpiece of leadership messaging. However, expansion-driven development lacking institutional reform risks intensifying systemic inefficiencies, including resource shortages, increased burdens on local populations, and declining project sustainability.

Third, symbolic political mobilization through major commemorative events will remain a key leadership tool as Kim enters a mature phase of rule consolidation. Ritual performances, loyalty pledges, and ideological messaging emphasizing state primacy and people-centered governance will reinforce cohesion narratives while masking potential internal tensions arising from elite rotation or policy strain.

Fourth, external appearances will continue reflecting strategic exploitation of geopolitical fragmentation. Alignment with Russia for security purposes, economic engagement with China, and calibrated ambiguity toward the United States are likely to persist. Inter-Korean relations will remain confrontational, reinforced through institutional and rhetorical codification of hostility.

Policy Implications

Recent patterns indicate that North Korea's regime management strategy relies on leveraging favorable external conditions to secure economic support, expand strategic partnerships, and strengthen domestic cohesion through adversarial positioning toward South Korea.

In response, South Korea should prioritize shaping the external environment rather than attempting unilateral engagement shifts. Such an approach would entail, first, engaging China—consistent with recent bilateral summit diplomacy—to assume a constructive role in sustaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula; second, cooperating with the international community to facilitate the early termination of the war in Ukraine while maintaining channels of dialogue with Russia; and third, further institutionalizing and consolidating ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation.

Particular vigilance is required regarding potential escalation linked to boundary-line declarations or maritime tensions. North Korea may seek to manipulate external tensions to influence U.S. policy positioning, test South Korean flexibility, or expand military assistance partnerships. Such actions could aim to challenge alliance cohesion and justify heightened military signaling, necessitating comprehensive preparedness.

Additionally, the intensified internal mobilization apparatus that North Korea strengthened last year is likely to generate aftereffects this year, bringing previously latent structural problems to the surface. As distortions in resource allocation and inefficiencies in economic management become more visible; as the limits of construction projects driven by outward expansion are exposed; as constraints on improving livelihoods and the spread of relative deprivation intensify; and as public disaffection and cadres' skepticism toward policy

implementation surface more clearly, the North Korean authorities will be placed in a situation where they cannot avoid considering internal reforms over the medium term. In anticipation of such a moment, South Korea should prepare measures to support a shift in North Korea's trajectory toward substantive reform and opening, rather than zigzagging, tactical adjustments.

About the Author

Dr. Han Ki-bum worked as a North Korea analyst at the National Intelligence Service over 20 years before retiring in February 2009 as the third deputy director (in charge of North Korea affairs). After retiring from the service, he worked as a visiting professor at Korea University and a visiting researcher at the Korea Institute for National Unification, And then served as the first deputy director of the NIS (in charge of North Korea and overseas affairs) again from April 2013 ~ February 2016. Since then, he has been working as a endowed Research Fellow at the Institute for National Unification, then as a endowed Research Fellow at the Institute for North Korean Studies, and as a Visiting Research Fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies from January 2024.

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