

ISSUE BRIEF

Executive Summary

No. 2025-26(S)

North Korea in the First Half of 2025: Insights from Kim Jong Un's Public Activities

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2025-08-01

Last first half of the year. During this period, Kim made a total of 51 public appearances, with military (24 instances) and economic (13 instances) sectors accounting for the majority—reflecting a trend similar to previous years. The most notable aspect of Kim Jong Un's public appearances in the first half of the year is the continued dominance of military-related activities, despite expectations that he would emphasize “pro-people policies” in the lead-up to the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party. Early in the year, Kim focused on showcasing North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities, but from March onward, his attention shifted to upgrading conventional weapons and, by April and May, promoting military exercises suited to modern warfare. His posture toward the United States appears to have been calibrated up until the time of Trump's inauguration, after which he turned toward maximizing practical gains through deeper cooperation with Russia.

In contrast, Kim's economic activities this year have been strikingly limited. Unlike in previous years, he did not visit civilian factories or enterprises, nor did he preside over any economic policy meetings. Instead, all of his economic-related appearances were limited to construction sites, most of them concentrated in February. Another key feature of his economic activity was the complete absence of visits to second-year construction sites for local light industry plants, suggesting a waning enthusiasm for the “20×10 Local Development Policy” he had previously championed.

In the realm of politics and foreign affairs, the most striking feature of North Korea's first-half behavior was its deepening cooperation with Russia. Kim Jong Un met three

times with Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu during this period and also attended events marking Russia's Victory Day as well as receptions with the Russian Minister of Culture. In July, a meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov further underscored strategic coordination between the two countries, with Kim's visit to Russia reportedly in the pipeline. In contrast, inter-Korean relations remained virtually frozen. North Korean state media provided only sporadic and minimal coverage of South Korea's political turmoil, and Kim Yo Jong's official statements were primarily aimed at the United States or broader international developments. On the domestic political front, the June plenary session of the Workers' Party proclaimed a highly positive evaluation of the first half. However, this appears to be more of a propagandistic effort than a reflection of actual progress, especially given that most of the session's contents were reportedly circulated only within the party in confidential form.

Looking ahead, North Korea's domestic agenda for the second half of 2025 is expected to center around preparations for the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party and the upcoming 9th Party Congress. Major events such as a large-scale military parade, mass gymnastics performances, and weapons exhibitions are likely. Kim Jong Un is expected to use these occasions to reinforce the narrative of a "nuclear power" entering an era of "comprehensive national revival." The anticipated participation of a Russian delegation would serve to amplify the notion of a "blood-forged alliance," and the launch of a military reconnaissance satellite before the parade would underscore the regime's growing military capabilities. This will likely be accompanied by an "80-day battle" campaign involving mass mobilization of citizens, heightened internal control, and intensified loyalty competitions.

For South Korea, it is critical to recognize that Kim remains far more invested in modernizing conventional military capabilities and promoting warfighting readiness than in improving the livelihoods of his people. While Seoul has pursued a flexible, preemptive approach—evidenced by the suspension of loudspeaker broadcasts—the combination of North Korea's internal political demands and its deepening alignment with Russia suggests that the likelihood of direct provocations toward the South may temporarily decline. Nevertheless, this does not reduce the urgency of preparing for the broader implications of Pyongyang's military build-up.

Kim's potential visit to Russia and further troop deployments to support Moscow's war effort will likely strengthen North Korea's strategic alignment with the Kremlin. Witnessing the U.S. airstrike on Iranian nuclear facilities may also prompt Kim to accelerate the advancement and fortification of his own nuclear and missile infrastructure. In the short term, the prospects for renewed U.S.-North Korea dialogue

appear slim. However, there remains a risk that former President Trump could pursue an unorthodox and unilateral approach to North Korea policy. This might involve scaling down U.S.-ROK joint military drills or orchestrating a sudden summit at Panmunjom prompted by an upcoming international event like the APEC summit in Gyeongju.

Against the backdrop of tightening North Korea-China-Russia alignment, any future attempt to re-engage Pyongyang diplomatically or pursue pragmatic negotiations must be carried out in a manner that preserves the cohesion of trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Japan.

This article is an English Summary of Asan Issue Brief (2025-20).

(‘김정은 공개 활동으로 본 북한 상반기 정세 평가’)