

ISSUE BRIEF

Executive Summary

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Comprehensive Assessment of the Operational Framework of North Korea's 8th Party Central Committee Plenary Meetings

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Taking the 13th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee as a case study, this analysis examined how the procedures of Party plenary meetings have become institutionalized. The findings suggest that the North Korean Party leadership has been managing current issues relatively smoothly through a periodic system of policy evaluation and oversight. However, beneath this outwardly orderly coordination structure, the long-standing tendency for responsibility to be deflected upward to the supreme leader, with no individual assuming policy accountability, remains unchanged.

A comprehensive analysis of the agendas of the 13 Party plenary meetings convened since the 8th Party Congress shows that North Korea classifies its agendas into regular agendas, working-level agendas, and ad hoc current-issue agendas. An examination of the proportion and trends of ad hoc agendas reveals that political and social issues, rather than economic ones, have more frequently emerged as pressing concerns, indicating that the Party authorities perceive a greater sense of policy crisis in these areas.

In conclusion, despite multiple sources of tension, North Korea's operational system for managing the 8th-term Party meetings has contained emerging problems and maintained policy management without major disruption. In the short term, even after the 9th Party Congress, the Workers' Party's regime-management functions are expected to continue operating effectively, supported by China and Russia and reinforced by strengthened internal mobilization mechanisms. In the medium to long term, however, the regressive nature of policies pursued without reform and opening, the limitations of internal mobilization and external support, and the potential for fractures within the Party leadership are likely to

significantly weaken the Party's policy management capacity and regime cohesion. Accordingly, policies that prepare for substantive changes in North Korea's policy orientation will be required.

This Issue Brief focuses on three key aspects: First, it provides an overview of how the plenary meeting was conducted and assesses the main points of Kim Jong Un's remarks. This allows for an examination of the standardized format of Party plenary meetings, the degree of Kim Jong Un's involvement, and the current policy direction. Second, based on the agenda items related to preparations for the Party Congress discussed at this meeting, it is essential to examine how the 9th Party Congress will be prepared, drawing on the precedent of the 8th Party Congress. Third, as the 13th Plenary Meeting marks the final meeting of the 8th Party Central Committee, synthesizing the agendas of the 13 plenary meetings convened during this term enables an analysis of policy changes over the past five years.

Detailed Analysis of the Meeting's Proceedings

The 13th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Party Central Committee, held as the final plenary session ahead of the 9th Party Congress, revealed three notable features: the institutionalization of meeting procedures, early signals of leadership reshuffling, and Kim Jong Un's policy assessment and guidance on Party Congress preparations.

First, the meeting was convened over three days and focused on regularized agenda items, including a review of policy implementation, a report by the Party Central Auditing Commission, preparations for the Party Congress, budget deliberations, and organizational matters. Compared to previous years, the shortened meeting schedule, the omission of sector-level research consultations, and the absence of ad hoc policy issues suggest that mid- and short-term policy debates are being deferred to the 9th Party Congress. Kim Jong Un's role was largely confined to policy evaluation and concluding remarks. At the same time, decision-making procedures increasingly reflected a collective responsibility structure centered on Jo Yong Won, indicating further institutional consolidation.

Second, while personnel changes within the Central Committee were limited in scale, the return and apparent rehabilitation of Ri Il Hwan, who had previously disappeared from public view, signal possible leadership realignment ahead of the 9th Party Congress. The composition and seating arrangements of the presidium suggest a continued balance among Party, military, and cabinet elites, alongside emerging competition for key posts within the Politburo. The potential reinstatement of Kim Yo Jong as a candidate member of the Politburo has also drawn attention.

Third, Kim Jong Un characterized 2025 as a year of policy success, while simultaneously issuing sharp criticism of formalism and bureaucratic behavior. He identified agriculture, regional development, education, and stricter fiscal and trade discipline as urgent tasks—

areas closely linked to accumulated public discontent. His renewed emphasis on “people-centeredness” appears to reflect an attempt to recalibrate policies that had previously prioritized performance targets and mobilization at the expense of public sentiment.

Finally, Kim outlined key tasks for preparing the Party Congress, including the completion of unfinished projects, a final review of the next Five-Year Plan, the reinforcement of discipline, and intensified political mobilization. Although the timing of the 9th Party Congress was not specified, precedent and preparatory indicators point to a possible convening in February 2026 or later in the spring. Overall, the plenary meeting is best understood as a transitional gathering aimed at consolidating policy achievements and shifting the regime’s strategic focus toward the upcoming Party Congress.

Analysis of Agenda Items at the 8th Party Plenary Meetings

1. Classification of Agenda Items

Over the past five years, plenary meetings of the 8th Party Central Committee were convened on a regular semiannual basis, with a total of 67 agenda items discussed. While core agenda items—such as policy reviews, budget deliberations, personnel matters, and Party discipline—became institutionalized, nearly half of the agenda items were ad hoc issues addressing specific challenges. This reflects a governance pattern in which routine policy reviews coexist with issue-specific crisis management.

2. Proportion and Trends of Agenda Items

Among agenda items, political and social issues significantly outnumbered economic ones, indicating that **regime stability, Party discipline, and cadre control** took precedence over economic management. From 2021 to 2022, food shortages, pandemic control, and social instability dominated the agenda, while from 2023 onward the focus shifted toward restoring administrative order and managing public sentiment. Overall, the policy emphasis evolved from **economic crisis response to discipline enforcement and, more recently, public sentiment management**.

3. Limits of Identifying External Policy Issues through Party Meetings

Party plenary meetings primarily function as instruments of domestic governance, with external affairs rarely addressed as standalone agenda items. When necessary, foreign and inter-Korean policy signals have been conveyed selectively through concluding remarks or through annual Supreme People’s Assembly speeches. As a result, a comprehensive understanding of North Korea’s external policy orientation requires **joint analysis of both Party plenary meetings and Supreme People’s Assembly sessions**.

Conclusion and Implications

The 13th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Party Central Committee was the final plenary session ahead of the 9th Party Congress and disclosed its outcomes only in a limited and highly summarized manner, focusing primarily on practical matters. Nonetheless, as a transitional meeting preceding leadership reshuffling and policy recalibration, it offers important insights into evolving governance and policy management practices in North Korea.

Since the 8th Party Congress, North Korea has strengthened a Party-centered governance system, institutionalizing plenary meeting procedures and agenda management. The standardized sequence, policy implementation reports, sector-level discussions, followed by concluding remarks by Kim Jong Un, has dispersed collective responsibility within the Party leadership while confining Kim's role largely to issuing final conclusions. The Party now effectively integrates oversight of policy, finances, personnel, and discipline, enhancing overall regime management efficiency.

However, collective decision-making also entails structural limits, as responsibility remains diffuse and final decisions continue to gravitate toward the supreme leader. While a significant portion of Kim's policy burden appears to have been delegated to Jo Yong Won, this arrangement is likely to face constraints over time.

Vulnerabilities in the current Party meeting system stem from three emerging changes. *First*, as economic conditions gradually improve, largely due to external factors, fragmentation among institutions is increasing, potentially weakening the uniform enforcement of policy directives. *Second*, the persistence of rigid, control- and ideology-centered policies has generated inefficiencies in economic management and reinforced structural rigidity, even amid signs of recovery. *Third*, potential shifts in the power structure, including changes within the Party leadership, could disrupt the existing coordination framework and undermine the increasingly institutionalized Party-centered policy management system.

Despite these challenges, the likelihood of a short-term crisis remains low. Following the 9th Party Congress, North Korea is expected to maintain its current leadership structure and policy line, legitimized by political and economic support from China and Russia, as well as recent governance outcomes. Its approach toward South Korea is also likely to continue along a path of severance and hostility.

Consequently, policies focused solely on influencing the North Korean leadership face inherent limitations. More effective approaches require parallel efforts aimed at shaping the perceptions of North Korean residents and elites, combined with sustained coordination with the international community. In this context, China remains a critical variable with the potential to encourage reform and opening, underscoring the importance of strategic engagement through Beijing. At the same time, continuous monitoring and preparation for

possible shifts in power structures and policy directions following the Party Congress remain essential.

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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