

ISSUE BRIEF

Executive Summary

No. 2025-38(S)

Evaluating the Celebration of the Korean Workers' Party 80th Founding Anniversary and the Implications for the 9th Party Congress

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2025-11-03

Starting in September, North Korea began creating an atmosphere to celebrate what it called the “grand festival of victors,” marking the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). By early October, the regime had completed a series of celebratory events to mark the occasion, such as an arms and equipment exhibition, a commemorative rally and mass gymnastics performance, a military parade, and public demonstrations.

This year's anniversary served to glorify “80 years of the Party's victorious and glorious leadership,” while invoking the “spirit of the founding of the Party” and reinforcing absolute loyalty to Kim Jong Un, thereby further consolidating the monolithic leadership system. North Korea highlighted the Party's leadership achievements, particularly Kim Jong Un's decade-long rule, under the banner of “people-first politics” and promoted the notion of “our-state-first” to elevate Kim's absolute authority. For party cadres, the event sought to rekindle the revolutionary enthusiasm of the Party's founding era and strengthen the Party's fighting spirit. For the general population, it aimed to instill “trust and gratitude” toward the Party, thereby mobilizing nationwide momentum ahead of the upcoming 9th Party Congress.

Accordingly, the 80th anniversary celebration can be interpreted as a stepping stone toward the forthcoming 9th Party Congress. If the 80th anniversary events primarily focused on propagating the Party's core leadership achievements while secondarily aiming to create a nationwide mobilization atmosphere, then the upcoming 9th Party Congress is expected to primarily emphasize the presentation of a midterm vision and national mobilization pledges, while secondarily conducting a comprehensive review of the Party's specific undertakings.

Based on Kim Jong Un's speech at the anniversary events, the forthcoming policy line can be summarized as: proclaiming a "Second Founding Era" to accelerate comprehensive national revival and launching a "Second Chollima Movement" to fully mobilize officials' loyalty and citizens' patriotism.

Grounded in that perspective, this *Issue Brief* analyzes the 80th anniversary celebration by focusing on the format and content of the events, particularly the propaganda surrounding Kim Jong Un's leadership achievements, while offering a brief outlook on the 9th Party Congress. Although North Korea showcased new weapon systems and invited the largest number of foreign dignitaries since Kim Jong Un's rise to power, this analysis focuses primarily on the broader political and ideological context rather than detailed assessments of the event's external dimensions or armaments.

September: Limited Benefits for the Public Despite Fostering "Festive" Atmosphere

Since the beginning of the year, Pyongyang has promoted the slogan "Let us glorify the 80th anniversary of the Workers' Party as a grand festival of victors." In September, the regime intensified production campaigns and bottom-up loyalty pledges to build a celebratory mood while introducing people-friendly policies designed to console and rally citizens.

Notably, however, despite the symbolic significance of the 80th anniversary, there were no broad welfare measures such as wage increases or large-scale distributions of daily necessities. Even Kim Jong Un's "gifts" were limited to a small number of recipients, suggesting that benefits for the public were extremely restricted. This likely reflects either a failure to secure sufficient materials for distribution or a continuation of the regime's established pattern of not employing compensatory incentives in recent years.

October: Highlighting Kim Jong Un's Leadership Through Diverse Events

Compared to previous milestones (such as the 70th or 75th anniversaries), the 80th anniversary celebration displayed four key differences in form:

1. Greater diversity of events,
2. Kim Jong Un's frequent speeches,
3. The invitation of high-level foreign dignitaries, and
4. The unveiling of new weapon systems during the military parade.

In terms of content, the events overwhelmingly focused on extolling the Party's leadership achievements, particularly Kim Jong Un's accomplishments.

First, the range of events was unprecedented. Whereas previous anniversaries featured either a mass gymnastics performance or a military parade, both requiring large-scale mobilization and long preparation periods, this time, multiple events were held concurrently to heighten the celebratory tone. Alongside the arms exhibition, North Korea advanced the opening ceremony of the Pyongyang General Hospital and organized visits to the Party Founding Museum, all intended to highlight Kim Jong Un's "comprehensive achievements" in national defense, people-oriented governance, and Party leadership. The events reached their peak in propaganda value by showcasing Kim's "strengthening of the Party's leadership and fighting capacity" as ushering in a "period of comprehensive national revival."

Second, Kim Jong Un's frequent public addresses were remarkable. Over the course of a week in early October, he delivered five official speeches. His active participation underscored confidence in his leadership and demonstrated good health.

Third, the regime invited high-level delegations from multiple countries. China and Russia each sent second-ranking officials, while the general secretary of Vietnam's Communist Party and the president of Laos visited Pyongyang for summit meetings with Kim Jong Un. In total, delegations from 11 countries attended, making it the largest foreign participation since the Kim Jong Il era.

Fourth, although the scale of weapons displayed at the military parade was smaller than in previous years, the diversity of new systems was greater. Approximately 16,000 troops and 40,000 civilians participated, with around 60 pieces of equipment representing 12 weapon categories.

Key systems unveiled included the *Hwasong-11Ma* hypersonic short-range ballistic missile, capable of penetrating South Korea's air defenses; the *Hwasong-20* intercontinental ballistic missile, touted as "the most powerful strategic nuclear weapon system"; and new conventional weapons such as the Chonma-20 tank and new multiple rocket launchers, underscoring modernization across both nuclear and conventional forces.

Analysis of Kim Jong Un's Speeches

Kim Jong Un delivered five speeches during events related to the 80th anniversary of the founding of the WPK. The core content of these speeches shared a common purpose: propagating the Party's leadership achievements and glorifying Kim Jong Un's own accomplishments. He praised the "remarkable achievements in the defense industry throughout the Party's 80-year history," emphasized his "love for the people," and highlighted the "development of a strong army capable of defending national sovereignty through strength," thereby promoting sector-specific achievements as his personal successes.

At the same time, Kim also articulated future domestic policy directions and priorities. In the military domain, he called for the "comprehensive and accelerated expansion of naval power"

and publicly announced plans to build “another Choe Hyon-class destroyer by October 10, 2026.”

Policy Implications and Conclusion

Beyond the 80th anniversary events, North Korea’s overall political agenda this year has focused heavily on promoting Kim Jong Un’s leadership achievements across all sectors. This propagandistic trend will likely culminate in the “five-year summary of Party work” to be presented at the upcoming 9th Party Congress. Based on Kim’s speeches at the September Supreme People’s Assembly and the October anniversary events, the Congress is expected to present a new policy vision and midterm objectives.

The forthcoming 9th Party Congress can be summarized as emphasizing that “Kim Jong Un has ushered in a period of comprehensive national revival across all sectors, and will now open a Second Founding Era to accelerate full-scale development.” The key policy tasks will likely focus on rekindling revolutionary enthusiasm among cadres and fostering a nationwide mobilization atmosphere to realize ambitious blueprints across economic, military, and social sectors.

At next year’s 9th Party Congress, the current leadership centered around Jo Yong-won is unlikely to undergo major changes, as the recent Party founding anniversary events were primarily aimed at glorifying the Party’s achievements. However, since Kim Jong Un repeatedly criticized “defeatism and formalism” in policy execution, a reshuffle targeting mid-level cadres is anticipated. The much-speculated issue of succession is expected to remain unaddressed, given Kim’s age and apparent health. Furthermore, since North Korea already conducted high-profile international outreach during the October celebrations, next year’s Congress is expected to be a purely domestic affair without inviting foreign delegations.

Looking ahead, the regime’s rigidity is likely to deepen due to the push for the absolute authority of Kim Jong Un, the emphasis on socialism, the tightening of Party control, and the creation of an all-out mobilization atmosphere. As Pyongyang simultaneously pursues development in urban and rural sectors, economy and military, healthcare and education, as well as nuclear and conventional weapons, distortions in resource management will worsen. In the short term after the 9th Party Congress, the regime may experience temporary stabilization through intensified “revolutionary zeal” campaigns, mass mobilization of labor, and efforts to restore ties with China following its current pro-Russia alignment. However, this total-mobilization approach runs counter to “policy flexibility, selectivity, and focus,” limiting the regime’s long-term prospects for revitalization.

Recently, Kim Jong Un appears buoyed by the strengthened DPRK–China–Russia alignment. This newfound confidence stems from the country’s nuclear and missile advancements, allowing North Korea to swiftly ride the wave of a new Cold War born out of U.S.–China

rivalry. In this process, North Korea has pursued adventurist moves such as dispatching troops to Russia and has adopted a unique “equidistance survival strategy,” using its ties with Russia to indirectly engage China. While this diplomatic balancing act may currently place North Korea in a favorable regional position, Kim surely recognizes that a downhill path filled with uncertainty awaits.

Judging from precedent, the year following the 9th Party Congress will be extremely busy domestically. However, the current rigid, confrontational mode of governance will eventually lose effectiveness, forcing Pyongyang to choose between addressing contradictions through internal reform or concealing them through external provocations. Therefore, instead of reacting too sensitively to North Korean threats and propaganda or rushing to reopen dialogue channels, Seoul should take a longer-term, measured view of unfolding trends.

Nevertheless, South Korea must remain vigilant against North Korea’s attempts to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington, as well as against China’s excessive tilt toward North Korea. It should also pay attention to Pyongyang’s intensified “anti-enemy struggle” aimed at entrenching the so-called “two-state theory” narrative in the international arena. On the inter-Korean front, despite Pyongyang’s claims of “severance and disregard,” South Korea should prepare for possible renewed maritime disputes near the Northern Limit Line (NLL), which may serve as pressure tactics to induce “fundamental appeasement measures” such as constitutional revisions on territorial clauses or amendments to the National Security Law. In particular, South Korea should also be wary of potential “gray-zone provocations” by officials in the North’s inter-Korean apparatus, as they may seek to demonstrate “achievements” ahead of the 9th Party Congress.

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 an endowed Research Fellow at the Institute for National Unification, then as an 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.

This article is an English Summary of Asan Issue Brief (2025-34).

(북한의 당창건 80 돌 기념행사 평가: 제 9 차 당대회 시사점 도출을 중심으로)