

ISSUE BRIEF

Executive Summary

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Assessment of the Workers' Party Personnel Reshuffle Following North Korea's 8th Party Congress

Han Ki-bum

Adjunct Senior Fellow
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This Issue Brief provides a comprehensive analysis of personnel reshuffles within North Korea's Workers' Party over the four years following the 8th Party Congress in 2021. By examining fluctuations in the composition of the Party's key policy-making and administrative bodies—the Politburo and the Secretariat—it evaluates Kim Jong Un's personnel management style, characteristics of regime control, and the potential for changes in the power structure.

Over the past four years, the Workers' Party has implemented moderately large-scale personnel changes at each plenary meeting, held approximately every six months. Among Politburo members, positions that experienced frequent turnover included the Secretary for Military Affairs and the Secretary of the Military Industry, with the official reasons cited as negligence in overseeing subordinate organizations and failures in economic management. Among candidate members of the Politburo, those responsible for propaganda, personnel, and disciplinary departments were frequently replaced to enhance party efficiency. The likelihood of entry into the central party from outside remains extremely low. Only a few high-level Cabinet technocrats and public security officials have been granted access, while internal promotions and concurrent appointments to both Politburo and Secretariat positions have become the norm, reflecting a closed system. This insularity also reflects Kim Jong Un's tendency to select personnel based on personal familiarity and closeness—a trait rooted in his reluctance to engage with unfamiliar individuals.

Based on a comprehensive analysis of these personnel reshuffles, the key characteristics of Kim Jong Un's personnel management style can be summarized as follows: centralized control of the Party through a closed circle centered around core figures such as Workers'

Party of Korea Organizational Secretary Jo Yong Won; recruitment of elite power figures based more on loyalty than expertise; activation of coordination and control functions over policy development; and frequent revolving-door appointments driven by Kim Jong Un's personal preferences. As a result, since the 8th Party Congress, North Korea's power structure has solidified its party-centered political system with the Party's coordination and control functions operating effectively, thereby enhancing Kim Jong Un's authority and enabling his undisputed rule. Put somewhat hyperbolically, one could say that Kim Jong Un was able to focus on advancing nuclear missile capabilities thanks to Jo Yong Won.

The elevation of the Supreme Leader's authority and the strengthening of party control have also brought about negative side effects. Despite the outward appearance of a solid dictatorship centered on the leader, policy conflicts among the ruling elite have been increasing, and defeatism among cadres has become severe. As Kim Jong Un's policy biases and authoritarian tendencies have intensified, the regime's vitality has been drained. This stems from the North Korean leadership's prioritization of control over efforts to improve policy outcomes—such as presenting a clear vision, expanding autonomy, offering incentives, and addressing implementation challenges. The core leadership is still expected to be filled based on loyalty, with a probable expansion in the appointment of military figures. Moreover, given Jo Yong Won's recent disciplinary action earlier this year, we may see the rise of figures intended to check his influence, along with the possible return of Kim Yo Jong to the Politburo.

Overall, the mid- to long-term outlook for changes in North Korea's power structure, as implied by the Workers' Party's personnel reshuffles, suggests that Kim Jong Un's party-centered system may gradually morph into a version of Kim Jong Il's crony politics and military-first (songun) policy, thereby accelerating internal fissures within the ruling elite. North Korea continues its military adventurism by advancing nuclear missile capabilities alongside modernizing conventional weapons, while demanding the suspension of ROK-U.S. joint military exercises to drive a wedge in the alliance.

Time is not entirely on North Korea's side. Although North Korea's cohesion is expected to hold through this year's 80th anniversary of the Party's founding and the 9th Party Congress in 2026 due to strengthened mobilization systems, factors such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the deepening North Korea–Russia ties, the North Korea–China–Russia alignment, and President Trump's overtures may lose their effectiveness by around 2027. South Korea must overcome political turmoil and trial-and-error challenges to establish a firm security posture that completely removes any room for North Korean provocations. At the same time, it must accelerate efforts to induce changes in North Korea's hardline authoritarian and military adventurism policies, promoting reform and opening.

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