

# ISSUE BRIEF

## Executive Summary

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## Assessment of the First Session of the 15th Supreme People’s Assembly of North Korea and Kim Jong Un’s Policy Speech

**Han Ki-bum**

Adjunct Senior Fellow

**Su Bo Bae**

Research Associate

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North Korea elected 687 deputies to the 15th Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) on March 15, 2026, the first such election in seven years, for a five-year term, and convened its first session on March 22–23. At the first meeting of the 15th SPA, North Korea discussed agenda items including: the election of the president of the State Affairs Commission; the election of state leadership bodies and sectoral committees of the Supreme People’s Assembly; amendments and supplements to the Socialist Constitution; the thorough implementation of the five-year national economic development plan presented at the 9th Party Congress; and the settlement of the 2025 state budget and the 2026 state budget. Kim Jong Un then delivered a policy speech.

In his policy speech, Kim Jong Un referred only briefly to two “achievements” of the past seven years: the entrenchment of the line of self-reliance and the securing of North Korea’s status as a nuclear weapons state. This appeared to signal that the public would once again be expected to “tighten its belt.”

As tasks for the organs of the regime, in the political and social spheres he presented “independence, self-sustenance, and self-defense” and the precedence of ideology as the guiding principles of state activity, while also raising the issues of promoting a new police system and establishing moral discipline. In the economic sphere, he identified as the tasks “to which efforts must be directed” the need to increase strained electricity and coal production and to resolve the food problem, described as the most urgent task. In the military

sphere, citing the “complex international situation,” he called for strengthening defense capabilities by giving top priority to the provision of human and material resources. In terms of external relations, he made North Korea’s anti-U.S. hostility even more explicit than at the Party Congress. Regarding South Korea, he formally recognized South Korea as the “most hostile state,” and revealed his determination to pursue a “struggle against the enemy,” thereby further amplifying and reproducing a sense of internal tension.

### **Results of the March 15 Election of Deputies to the 15th Supreme People’s Assembly**

North Korea held the election for deputies to the 14th Supreme People’s Assembly in March 2019, so in principle, the election for the 15th SPA should have taken place in 2024. In reality, however, it was held two years later, on March 15, 2026. Although North Korea did not officially explain the reason for the delay, it appears to have intended to align the cycle and term of the Supreme People’s Assembly with those of the Party Congress so that Party and state institutions would operate under the same structure of responsibility. Kim Jong Un made this intention clear in his policy speech at the first session of the 15th SPA, stating that the Party Congress and the Supreme People’s Assembly, as well as the Party’s central leadership bodies and state leadership bodies, had come to share the same cycle, term, and responsibility. As for the election results, North Korea announced a 99.99 percent turnout and 99.93 percent approval rate, while also disclosing that there had been a small number of dissenting votes, thereby attempting to project the appearance of at least nominal voter choice.

In this election, North Korea also released the list of 687 newly elected deputies and their sectoral composition, claiming that they broadly represented all segments of society; 108 of them were women. However, both Kim Jong Un and Choe Ryong Hae, the previous chairman of the SPA Standing Committee, were absent from the list, while Jo Yong Won, who had not been a 14th-term deputy, was newly included, suggesting the possibility of a future shift in key posts. Overall, more than 70 percent of the deputies were replaced compared to the 14th SPA, indicating a large-scale personnel reshuffle. This is widely interpreted as an effort to renew the mid-level cadre layer responsible for policy implementation and to improve the efficiency of regime management. North Korea portrayed the election as more democratic and representative. However, in substance, there was no fundamental change: the Supreme People’s Assembly still functions primarily as a rubber-stamp body that approves Party decisions, and the non-democratic system of yes-or-no voting on a single Party-designated candidate remains intact.

## Results of the First Session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly (March 22-23)

### 1. *Formation of the New "State Leadership Bodies."*

North Korea convened the first session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly just one week after the election of deputies, moving quickly to reorganize not only the Party leadership but also the leadership of the state apparatus. On the first day of the meeting, it formed the so-called state leadership organs, including the election of the president of the State Affairs Commission, the State Affairs Commission itself, the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, the premier, and cabinet members. On the second day, it discussed constitutional revisions, the new five-year national economic development plan, and the state budget, after which Kim Jong Un delivered a policy speech. Most importantly, Kim was reappointed as president of the State Affairs Commission, while Jo Yong Won, by concurrently serving as chairman of the SPA Presidium and first vice chairman of the State Affairs Commission, emerged as a new key executive figure replacing Choe Ryong Hae. However, this appears less to signify Jo's absolute rise in power than to reflect a restructuring of the system to enable the Party's intentions to be carried out more immediately. In addition, a large number of Party secretaries were placed on the State Affairs Commission, Kim Yo Jong was excluded, and the former Ministry of State Security appears to have been renamed the State Intelligence Bureau, suggesting an effort to strengthen both regime control and intelligence-gathering functions.

In the cabinet reshuffle, Pak Thae Song was retained as premier, while the most notable change was the appointment of Kim Tok Hun to the newly created post of first vice premier. This suggests that although Kim stepped down as premier, he is still expected to play an important role in economic management and in reinforcing the cabinet-centered system of responsibility. At the same time, several cabinet-affiliated committees—including the State Price Commission, the State Inspection Commission, and the Pyongyang Construction Commission—were abolished, indicating an attempt to streamline the cabinet structure and readjust its functions. In addition, placing the shipbuilding sector under the control of the Second Economic Committee appears aimed at concentrating more heavily on military production, including the construction of warships and submarines. The decision to return the Ministry of Social Security to the cabinet, along with Kim Jong Un's mention of a "new police system," also points to a further strengthening of the regime's mechanisms of social control. Overall, the session was characterized by an effort to rebuild the Kim Jong Un-centered governing system in a more efficient and direct manner through personnel reshuffles, organizational adjustments, and tighter control mechanisms.

## *2. Formation of the New “State Leadership Bodies.”*

In this constitutional revision, North Korea disclosed no specific amended provisions and stated only that it had removed the word “Socialist” from the title of the constitution, changing it from the “Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” to the “Constitution of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.” This appears less to be a move to weaken the regime’s ideological character than an effort to promote the distinctiveness and supposed superiority of North Korea’s constitution. It also appears that the more consequential revisions that had drawn attention, such as the removal of references to the nation and unification or the addition of a territorial clause, were either not actually carried out this time or at least were not made public. Accordingly, the core significance of this constitutional revision is best understood not as a structural change in North Korea’s policy toward South Korea, but rather as a symbolic adjustment to the constitution’s title.

## *3. Implementation of the Third Five-Year Plan and Settlement/Budget Issues*

At the 15th Supreme People’s Assembly, North Korea discussed implementation measures for a new five-year plan for National Economic Development plan as well as the settlement of the budget, along with approval of the 2026 budget. Moreover, it strongly emphasized that it had achieved a certain degree of economic progress over the past five years. Premier Pak Thae Song claimed that production of steel, fertilizer, nonferrous metals, cement, and fishery products had increased significantly compared to 2020. However, these figures are limited in value because they are measured against 2020, when the economy had sharply contracted, indicating that the overall economy does not appear to have recovered to pre-sanctions levels. In addition, the new plan still lacks specificity, as it offers broad policy directions rather than concrete sectoral targets or investment plans.

On the budget side, North Korea stated that 2025 budget revenue had been executed at 105.1 percent of plan, and that the 2026 budget was drawn up with a 0.5 percent increase in revenue and a 5.8 percent increase in expenditure. In particular, the rise in spending for 2026 is noticeably larger than in the previous five years, and expenditures related to the people’s economy also increased by 6.3 percent, suggesting that the budget is focused on carrying out the first-year tasks of the new five-year plan. At the same time, however, the share of defense spending remains high at 15.7 percent in 2025 and 15.8 percent in 2026, indicating that the strengthening of defense capabilities remains just as central to budget management as economic revitalization and improvements in public welfare. Taken together, these discussions suggest that while North Korea is showcasing selected economic achievements, it still faces structural problems in areas such as energy, food, and local industry, and that the new plan continues to rely more on political will and mobilization logic than on concrete implementation capacity.

## Evaluation of Kim Jong Un's Policy Speech at the Supreme People's Assembly

In his policy speech on the final day of the first session of the first session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly, Kim Jong Un referred only briefly to two achievements of the past seven years while placing greater emphasis on outlining the tasks to be carried out by state institutions going forward.

*In the political and social spheres*, he stressed the principles of independence, self-sustenance, and self-defense, as well as the improvement of *inminban* neighborhood-unit work, the promotion of a new police system, and the establishment of moral discipline. Taken together with the personnel and organizational reshuffling carried out at this Supreme People's Assembly, Kim's reappointment as president of the State Affairs Commission can be seen as a move foreshadowing the further strengthening of his personal authority and cult of leadership. The introduction of a first vice premier system in the cabinet and the abolition of several committees appear intended to strengthen a cabinet-centered economic management system, but in practice, the priority allocation of resources to the military sector is likely to limit its effectiveness. More broadly, the renewed emphasis on self-reliance and ideological primacy suggests a further intensification of mass mobilization and tighter control over officials. The direction is clear: through the reorganization of the *inminban* and police systems, as well as tighter state-led control over commerce and distribution, the regime appears intent on further reinforcing both social control and the state's extractive functions.

*In the economic sphere*, he presented the technological modernization of key industrial sectors and the expansion of production capacity in the metal, chemical, electricity, and coal sectors as core tasks under the new five-year economic development plan. In particular, he identified electricity and coal as the most strained sectors and emphasized that overall industrial output should be increased by 1.5 times. At the same time, he stressed the importance of improving livelihood-related sectors, as well as resolving the food problem. He also stated that the government would push ahead with the supply of goods for students, housing construction, the development of tourism and cultural zones, local development, and the activation of trade. In particular, by reaffirming plans to build 370,000 housing units nationwide and to continue development in coal-mining areas as well as local cities and counties, he signaled an intention to pursue economic growth and improvements in people's livelihoods in parallel.

*In the military sphere*, Kim Jong Un argued that growing international uncertainty requires North Korea to prioritize worst-case preparation and long-term strategic interests over short-term gains. He said only overwhelming strength can guarantee victory, instead that North Korea must irreversibly solidify its status as a nuclear weapons state, and used this logic to justify continued nuclear development and a long-term confrontation strategy toward the United States. He also pledged to further strengthen nuclear deterrence, improve rapid-response capabilities, and expand military modernization and defense resources.

*Externally*, he made North Korea's hostility toward the United States and its willingness to engage in a protracted confrontation even more explicit, underscoring his intention to pursue a long-term confrontation. He also justified North Korea's continued nuclear development line by arguing that the country's possession of nuclear weapons guarantees regime security, while suggesting the possibility of expanding diplomatic ties with non-Western and socialist states. Toward South Korea, he continued to define it as the most hostile state, emphasized the need for a "struggle against the enemy." Meanwhile, in relations with China and Russia, he suggested that while North Korea would maintain its traditional friendships, it could also adjust its diplomatic priorities on the basis of national interest and strategic autonomy, revealing an effort to pursue a more strategic and selective approach in its external relations overall.

### **Conclusion and Policy Implications for South Korea**

The launch of North Korea's 15th Supreme People's Assembly can be summarized by three main characteristics. First, in terms of the power structure, it strengthened Kim Jong Un's personalized ruling system. Second, in terms of policy direction, it signaled a greater emphasis on strengthening national defense and intensifying confrontational diplomacy against its adversaries, rather than on economic revitalization. Third, in terms of regime management, it appears to have moved even further away from reform and opening, suggesting that the rigidity and closed nature of the system are unlikely to improve as Pyongyang continues to prioritize ideology, tighten social control, and adhere to a self-reliance line.

On the surface, this approach seems to have had some success in projecting North Korea as a stable "powerful state" and in helping Kim shed his earlier image as an inexperienced leader. However, the next five years will be a critical turning point for the regime. Without reform or opening, stronger control, poor improvement in people's livelihoods, preferential allocation of resources to the defense sector, and intensifying tensions among the party, state, military, and market are likely to reduce regime efficiency and deepen public discontent. As North Korea may therefore intensify both its inter-Korean and external offensives, South Korea will need to strengthen coordination with the United States and broaden its international diplomatic response, while also preparing thoroughly for various forms of North Korean provocation, including clashes near the NLL, cognitive warfare, and diplomatic confrontation in international arenas.

## 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.

**Su Bo Bae** is a research associate at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. She received her B.A. in German Language and Literature from Seoul National University and earned her M.A. in North Korean Studies from Korea University. Before joining the Asan Institute, she worked as a researcher at the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB). Her research interests include North Korean human rights, the North Korean political system, and inter-Korean relations.

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(‘북한의 최고인민회의 제 15 기 제 1 차 회의 및 김정은 시정연설 평가’)