North Korea Current Domestic Situation Evaluation

A review of international assessments concerning the internal state of North Korea leads us to the conclusion that most experts remain within the basic approach prevailing in West capitals including Washington. To put its essence briefly and simplistically, it boils down to the simple formula "time is on our side", since the North Korean regime is doomed and sooner or later will collapse under the weight of economic sanctions, difficulties caused by rigid self-isolation in attempts to stop Covid-19 on the closed borders of the state.

Over the past two or three years, media outlets all across the globe have been emphasizing North Korea’s growing isolation from the outside world, marking the country’s inevitable economic slump, which may potentially lead to the dissolution of the state.

The economic siege appears to come from two fronts: international sanctions and sanctions initiated by individual countries, primarily the United States, which have been comprehensible since 2017. Washington has been making an effort to ensure that its blockade is impenetrable and that it remains so for time to come. The designations of such U.S. strategy may change; however, its essence remains the same. Under Donald Trump, it came to be known as “maximum pressure” campaign. The incumbent Biden administration claims to have adopted a different approach, wherein it is ready to meet with representatives of North Korea “anytime and anywhere.” Yet, in practice, it is obvious that the United States only seeks to reinvigorate its sanctions
regime, ignoring the implications of COVID-19 as well as repeated calls coming from UN Secretary-General António Guterres to lift all sanctions during the pandemic.

The rigidity of this policy was evident during a series of online ministerial meetings with the ASEAN countries in early August 2021, when Secretary of State Antony Blinken would persistently call for “full implementation” of the sanctions regime against North Korea. The decision to extend a ban on travel for U.S. citizens to North Korea adopted by Washington early in September can also be attributed to this policy stance. The decision disappointed many in America’s expert community who saw it as a “missed opportunity for U.S. diplomacy” as “suspension of the Trump-era travel ban would have been consistent with the Biden administration’s public remarks about its North Korea policy objectives.”

At the same time, the Western media tend to adopt a conservative stance when assessing the domestic situation in North Korea. We are witnessing an increasing number of critical, if not fatal, social and economic difficulties that could lead to the regime’s collapse, with the main reason for them largely being the regime’s own mistakes rather than the suffocating sanctions of the international community. The media refer to such errors as introducing an excessive lockdown to counter COVID-19, “tightening the screws” by exerting stricter control over the population, “brainwashing” the population, searching for scapegoats for the country’s economic problems, etc.

Therefore, it would be a good time to give some of our thoughts and conclusions about how political processes in North Korea have been evolving. As of the major political events of 2021, we have to mention the following.

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1) Nobody can ignore the scope and intensity of the political activities consistently undertaken by the country’s leadership.

North Korea’s Kim Jong-un took action to return the country to the classical model of “party-political work” typical of a socialist state. He is staying loyal to the slogan proclaimed when he came to power, “everyone should focus on their own work.” The army should build up defence capabilities, the party should stick to the political agenda while the Cabinet should deal with the economy, with the military now losing some of the powers it had acquired when the nation was in the pursuit of a “military-oriented policy” to see the army actively involved in politics and economic activity.

The country’s leader keeps a close eye on the compliance with statutory norms regulating the timeframes for holding party forums: the 8th Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea took place exactly five years after the previous Congress, followed, only six months later, by three plenary meetings of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea as well as three extended meetings of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea were held. At these meetings, pressing challenges facing the country are discussed on an almost monthly basis. This started from the 8th Congress, during which Kim Jong-un demonstrated a direct and open approach as he declared that a number of key tasks of the previous five-year plan had not been fulfilled as effectively and swiftly as needed. These include maintaining and strengthening the emergency, anti-epidemiological and sanitary measures to prevent COVID-19 from proliferating throughout the country, battling the food shortage emerged in May to June 2021, rebuilding the areas devastated by natural disasters as well as the “definitive fulfilment of the grain production plan”.

Alongside these party forums, a series of large-scale industry-specific congresses were held during this period. These, among others, included meetings of

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3 Rodong Shinmun, 18.06.2021, A meeting of the third day of the III Plenum of the Central Committee of the WPK of the eighth convocation was held.
조선로동당 중앙위원회 제 8기 제 3차전원회의 3일회의 진행
youth, trade and women’s unions, meetings of secretaries of primary party organizations, the 7th National Conference of War Veterans. Each congress lasted a few days, being all attended by several thousand delegates. For example, some 10,000 delegates took part in the 6th Conference of Cell Secretaries of the Korean Workers’ Party in April 2021.

All this was against the backdrop of a difficult situation in the economy that has largely been caused by the international blockade (both due to suffocating sanctions and as a result of the country’s self-isolation) as well as the complete shutdown of borders to prevent coronavirus from entering the country.

These facts alone show that the country has demonstrated resilience in spite of all the difficulties.

2) Logically all these events show that Kim Jong-un is committed to building a socialist state and to carrying out his political agenda through a communist-type party, which is something he puts a premium on.

At the same time, some believe one explanation for why he is doing all this is that he would like to win respect of Xi Jinping, who promotes the same values in China within the Communist Party of China (CCP).

The most recent of these forums, the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea held in June 2021, attracted a great deal of attention.

Much work was done to prepare for the plenary, such as a meeting between the party and economic activists in the run-up to the event. The work of the plenary was well organized: the clearly structured programme featured specific sessions and on-topic panel discussions.

Just like at all previous events, the main tasks facing the country were highlighted at the plenary. These include searching for ways to overcome the economic challenges—a topic discussed rather frankly—as well as taking efforts to uphold the strict lockdown measures put in place to prevent COVID-19 from making its way into the country. The most pressing and urgent challenges for the country were thus placed front and center.
Requirements to provide a decent nutrition for children in kindergartens, to include dairy products\(^4\), speak to the country’s severe economic situation while the crackdown on anti-socialist and, interestingly, “non-socialist” phenomena—including “defeatism and opportunism,” which are now viewed as the most negative factors—speak to the difficult political situation\(^5\).

This shows that the current state of severe economic turbulence prefers a dominant, state-controlled, centralized economy, while experiments with market economy are phased out. That said, it is unlikely that the market-oriented sector of the economy will completely disappear.

One of the principal tasks of all these party forums was to mobilize party members, activists and the populace to unprecedented levels in order to tackle the tasks set forth during the 8th Congress and elaborated at subsequent plenary meetings, which were aimed at adapting the country’s economy to the new conditions of the blockade and a dire economic situation.

An integral function of this task was to disseminate information amongst the population regarding the proposed party policy and its goals, which was achieved via numerous public gatherings, forums and other events. This is unlikely to surprise anyone. This area of work has and will always remain a priority in any political system worldwide.

Yet, interestingly, party activists have also initiated the search for new and creative solutions to current challenges by using their own resources, searching for people capable of generating new ideas, approaches and methods of work, later promoting them to higher ranks in the party. This is currently one of the highest priorities\(^6\). Essentially, the main idea revolves around the fact that it is impossible to

\(^4\) Ibid

\(^5\) Report on the Second Plenum of the Central Committee of the WPK of the eighth convocation, 12.02.2021

\(^6\) Ibid
solve new crises with old solutions. Thus, those unable to implement new and effective approaches must be removed from leadership at all levels. This, on the one hand, seems to explain the frequent changes in party members at various levels. On the other hand, the same process testifies to full-fledged and functioning social and career lifts in the socio-political system.

A review of North Korea’s political and socio-economic activity over the first nine months of 2021 brings us to the following conclusions.

The situation in the country, especially in the economy, is rather grave—perhaps, even drastic in certain aspects. The causes have already been mentioned. Nonetheless, this is nothing out of the ordinary, and the challenges faced by the country are far from unprecedented. Many analysts from around the world keep returning to the question of how resilient North Korea really is and how long the country can stay afloat amid the current situation. Our answer here would be “for a long time to come.”

North Korea is certainly a country with many peculiarities. For almost the entire history of its 73-year existence, the country has been under sanctions and serious external pressure which have only intensified over the past 30 years and almost led to its collapse. However, not only has North Korea withstood these challenges, but it has been able, albeit at a moderate pace, to attain development goals, consistently strengthening its defence capabilities (including a very real nuclear potential) and the civilian sector of the economy (including several partially successful market-oriented experiments when the external situation allowed).

The expert community has always attempted to guess the secret ingredient to the endurability of the North Korean regime. An obvious component would be the unique social-economic mechanisms tailored to the country’s unique situation. The socialist model of economic mobilization, well-known from the first five-year plans of the USSR, demonstrated throughout World War II and during the post-war reconstruction of the economy, is highly effective. Ironically, it should be noted that U.S. think tanks have only now begun to ponder “decoupling”, conceptualization of the need to separate the economies of the United States and China, which were knit closely together during what Washington now sees as unsuccessful globalization. At the same
time, North Korea’s founding father, Kim Il-sung, put forward the theory of “self-reliance,” primarily in the economic sphere, back in the 1960s. North Korea has since followed this path, which is of great help in hard times.

The challenges faced by North Korea today, no matter how much they hurt, have not yet reached the level of the so-called “Arduous March”, the severe economic crisis of the mid- to late 1990s. Analysts who closely monitor the language used during the mentioned party forums noted that nothing was said about a “Second Arduous March.” It would seem that the country’s leadership has calculated all risks and is taking fairly effective measures to control them in time. A successful COVID-19 strategy is one such example. The country instantly responded to the global threat, “tightly” closing its borders in January 2020, when many people had not yet heard of the new virus. The virus has not yet spread to North Korea. No doubt, the economic costs of such a prolonged self-isolation is exceptionally high. But Pyongyang chose, from its point of view, the lesser of two evils. And it looks like the leadership made the right decision. North Korea has experience in dealing with unprecedented economic difficulties.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that an analysis of the domestic activity in North Korea shows that, despite serious, sometimes intimidating economic challenges, political life in the country is full, rich and dynamic. This speaks, amongst other things, to the leadership’s confidence in the situation in the country.

In framework of our analysis, we are pleased to underline that some very experienced experts regarding North Korea affairs in Seoul share such our outcomes: “I believe the regime is relatively robust and, in fact, more stable than that of Kim Jong Il. … while Kim Jong Un inherited certain aspects of the same means of physical control and a more relaxed cult of personality, he also set an agenda that prioritizes an improved standard of living for his people on the basis of pragmatic, reformist policies. Not only has this earned him more trust from North Koreans, it has also made his regime more resilient to external changes and more flexible to opening compared to that of his late father.”

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7 Jong-seok Lee, The Kim Jong Un Regime: Practical and Sustainable, Global Asia, September 2021 (Vol.16 No/ 3),