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7th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea: Implications and Tasks for South Korea

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1. 7th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) for an Era of Kim Jong-un

The 7th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea began on May 6 and ended May 9. As the party's first congress since 1980, the 7th Congress boasted a noticeable grandeur with an unprecedented participation of 3,467 delegates with the right to vote and 200 delegates with the right to make propositions. It is no surprise that the 7th Congress received as much public attention as it did, as it is the highest deliberative institution for political activity. The Congress presents modifications for North Korea's programs and contracts based on the WPK's ideologies. The Congress is also an opportunity to develop the party's

policies and strategies and elect a core leadership group. Granted, the voting process is only a formality, highly ritualized and characterized by rehearsed cheering and rampant displays of support. However, the fact that such decisions are passed by voting procedures validates and justifies all results.

North Korea has presented its ideological principles and programs at its past six congresses. The country was unable to clearly formulate its political ideologies at the 1st and 2nd Congresses before the Korean (6.25) War, but during the 3rd Congress, it announced a Marxist and Leninist approach as the guiding ideology for the state. At its 4th Congress in 1961, North Korea added an anti-Japanese guerrilla tradition as another guiding ideology. This ideology was foundational in consolidating Kim Il-sung's dictatorship. At its 5th Congress, *juche*, its political ideology of self-reliance, had become the core ideology for the state. The 6th Congress in 1980 made Kim Jung-il's succession as the state's next ruler official, and his succession solidified and validated North Korea's principle of self-reliance. Evidently, each Congress had been an instrumental occasion for establishing North Korea's political identity, which makes studying the 7th Congress an absolute necessity.

Following the 6th Congress in 1980, Kim Il-sung announced that the next congress would not take place until the country were able to provide rice and beef soup for its citizens. Kim Il-sung and Kim Jung-il ruled according to this statement for the next 36 years. However, Kim Jong-un, ignoring his grandfather's instructions, opened the next congress within his fifth year of ruling. Spending away his resources, he orchestrated the massive festive event that became the 7th Congress because he needed his own coronation. Just as Kim Jung-il consolidated his domination with the ideology of an anti-Japanese guerrilla tradition at the 4th Congress, Kim Jong-un wanted to solidify his power by announcing the results of his two nuclear tests. This explains North Korea's 70-day campaign of mass mobilization for increased industrial production and the establishment of the Baekdu Mountain power plant; Kim Jong-un was determined to repair his damaged reputation as dictator with his speeches and financial growth reports at the 7th Congress.

2. Less Conspicuous Implications of the 7th Congress

Kim Jong-un characterized the 7th Congress as an opportunity to propel the cause of the *juche* revolution. In characterizing the country's possession of nuclear weapons as an attestation of the success of his five-year ruling, he reaffirmed the party's policies for nuclear and economic co-development. He blamed international sanctions on North Korea as an excuse for the state's low performance on the quality of life index. He cited the country's political power, military power, and youth power as the party's achievements in making North Korea a Great Power nation over the past 36 years, and he justified the hereditary succession of power as a requisite for the continuation of the state's success. In addition, he showed contradictory behavior by asserting the world's denuclearization and

nuclear non-proliferation. He also declared the need for a reunification initiative based on North Korea's three charters: 1) Kim Il-sung's Three Principles on Reunification, 2) proposal for founding the Democratic Confederal Republic of Koryo, 3) Ten Point Programme of the Great Unity of the Whole Nation. In regards to improving the quality of life for North Korea's citizens, he proposed a five-year (2016–2020) program for economic development. However, given that he presented no specific agenda and only a vague objective, it is likely to be a plan of limitations with little chance of ever being put into practice. He also mentioned conversation and peace for South Korea to change its policy towards North Korea. In terms of peace and reunification, he has implied that South Korea is to blame for initiating conflict and exacerbating their relationship. He presented that creating a united Confederal Republic of Korea is a process characterized by a revolution in South Korea followed by a communist unification.

Kim Jong-un prepared the 7th Congress with various goals. In terms of domestic objectives, the voting process, albeit a formality, completed Kim's coronation and validated and institutionalized the country's generational dictatorship. He reinforced the stability and strength of a hereditary dictatorship. In terms of foreign objectives, he emphasized the importance of countries with nuclear weapon possessions in hopes of strengthening its ties to the US. In terms of South Korea, he has tried to gain the upper hand in the peninsula's progress towards reunification.

The 7th Congress, essentially a self-coronation executed by and for Kim Jong-un, was a political move in which Kim Jong-un institutionalized the country's hereditary dictatorship and reclaimed Kim Il-sung's title as party director. He strengthened Kim Il-sung's military first (songun) policy to a nuclear first (sunhaek) policy. In terms of economics, the ambiguity of his five-year economic development plan and its reliance on mass mobilization signified a decline in efforts to improve the livelihood of its citizens and presented economic development in the narrow framework of economic relief. It is thus important to recognize that the 7th Congress prioritizes nuclear development to economic development. Presenting the outdated 1950s idea of mass mobilization for economic achievement not only shows a lack of adjustment to the change of times but also signifies the disturbing standardization of labor exploitation.

3. Tasks for South Korea in Response to North Korea's Foundational Transformations

The 7th Congress was actually a backward move for Kim Jong-un in his blatant disregard for universal values. The event was rather tragic, as seen by his attempt to justify a generational dictatorship, his negligence of the people's fundamental human needs, and his ambition to elevate the importance of nuclear possessions. Even more problematic is that

there seems to be little possibility of Kim Jong-un ever adhering to the standards of universal values. Therefore, North Korea needs a foundational change; it is important to acknowledge that a transformation in North Korea through conversation alone will not suffice.

The ideological transformations of socialist countries in the mid- to late-1980s provide perspective on ideological transformations. Incentives for regime change were 1) a severe economic crisis and the lack of funds, 2) external information flow, 3) religious groups and social activity, and 4) extreme income gaps. North Korea is no exception to these conditions.

The first requirement for transformation in North Korea is a sealing and maintaining a blockage on Kim Jong-un's government funding. The UN Security Council imposed Resolution 2270 on North Korea this March following the state's fourth nuclear test in January. Funding has slowed with the disclosure of the reports on the resolution's implementation, and it has been opportunity to justify and increase sanctions on North Korea. In particular, the US has defined North Korea as a money-laundering state. It is important to strengthen international investigation and ensure sanctions to secure and sustain this blockage. It is also necessary to strengthen diplomatic means to prevent potential deviance in Russia and China.

Next, a regime change requires the development of tools and strategies for North Koreans to gain more exposure to outside information. It is important to actively use existing North Korean communication technologies such as its intranet and the 3,700,000 mobile phones possessed by its citizens. Stimulating information flows into North Korea, information circulation within North Korea, and information flows out of North Korea are essential for democratization and the development of a civil society. It is generally understood that information flows at the DMZ are limited. Kim Jong-un mentioned at the 7th Congress that broadcasts of psychological warfare, propaganda, or any other activity that provokes and slanders the other side should be terminated immediately. This statement reveals his fear of information flows into North Korea. But while blocking Kim Jong-un's funds requires South Korea's cooperation with other countries, building information systems is an operation South Korea can execute independently. Developing these communication systems requires the patience and wisdom of the South Korea's people, and the determination of South Korea's leader.