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North Korea's Priority May be Food Over Nukes

For the time being, at least, Kim Jong-Un's attention appears to be focused on North Korea's food crisis.

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Times are tough in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The United States and Republic of Korea (ROK) threaten militarily. Foreign cultures undermine ideologically. And inadequate rural development fails agriculturally.

Kim, impeccably attired in a Western-style business suit, spoke at the five-day Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) plenum ending 2021. The conference was directed largely inward, lacking "messages for the U.S. or South Korea like those that Kim has delivered in previous New Year's policy speeches," according to Colin Zwirko and Jeongmin Kim of NKNews. In fact, explained the Sejong Institute's Cheong Seong-chang: "If we consider this report on the plenum as a replacement of Kim Jong-un's annual New Year's speech, it can be said that it's by far the shortest mention of inter-Korean relations and foreign policy ever."

The event's focus was economics, and especially food. The party report cited progress, including "great improvement and results" as part of the implementation of the new five-year plan. The WPK noted that select projects were being completed. Yet significant difficulties were manifest. The party admitted that it sought to "find out the method of stabilizing the economy in the most difficult circumstances," which evidently was not achieved. Moreover, the report cited success in "consolidating" economic rules involving state plans and "strengthening" cabinet controls. This appeared to continue the reversal of economic reforms and reassertion of state economic primacy.

Rural development appeared to be least successful. At least, Kim and the party were more critical of current policy. The WPK set forth a typically positive objective, to "open a great new era of achieving a radical development of the socialist countryside of Korean style." Given the DPRK's longstanding inability to feed itself, it's hard to imagine what the party meant.

In any case, the "radical development of the socialist countryside of Korean style" apparently has not been attained. The Supreme Leader did not sound happy, though he avoided his severe rhetoric earlier in the year when he stated that the "people's food situation is now getting tense as the agricultural sector failed to fulfill its grain production plan." One of the agenda items at the

June party plenum was “On establishing an emergency policy on overcoming the current food crisis.”

Nevertheless, outside observers told NKNews that the continuing focus on the subject is significant. Observed Joshua Pollack of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies: “This striking emphasis on agriculture combined with the many references to severe difficulties suggests that hunger is already a serious problem.” Similar was the assessment of Thomas Schäfer, formerly German ambassador to the DPRK: “Dispensing so many words on agriculture seems to be a clear sign that the situation there is dire indeed.”

At the latest gathering, Kim emphasized “solving current rural issues to boost the agricultural production of the country.” He also ordered those assembled to “solve the issue of food, clothing, and housing for the people.” That presumably is necessary for him to fulfill his pledge to the party and North Korean people: “The main task facing our Party and people next year is to provide a sure guarantee for the implementation of the five-year plan and bring about a remarkable change in the state development and the people's standard of living.”

The obvious question is how? Especially given the regime’s turn away from earlier economic reforms. Which may be related to other themes at the plenum.

One is the emphasis on security, with no hope expressed for improved relations with Washington. Kim may have decided on a long-term commitment to autarky and practical abandonment, irrespective of his rhetoric, of any serious effort to improve the welfare of the North Korean people. NKNews’ Peter Ward argued that Kim’s emphasis on heavy industry may be a security measure, since “The regime needs to produce certain key industrial products for national defense and to ensure self-reliance in major areas of the industrial economy.” Indeed, this approach looks a lot like the strategy of Kim’s father and grandfather. The regime likely expects Beijing to see the North through hard times.

The other issue is combating ideological subversion. Kim once appeared to welcome Western and South Korean culture, having hosted not only a K-Pop concert but an earlier event with Disney figures. However, the regime recently began a dramatic crackdown on access to such forbidden fruit. The latest plenum continued this theme, lauding North Korean youth who abandoned “anti-socialist” attitudes and turned back toward subservience to the party. And the WPK pledged to “wage more active struggle against the anti-socialist and non-socialist practices throughout the Party, the state and the society.” Notably, economic isolation makes it easier to enforce ideological purity by reducing smuggling opportunities.

Pollack suggested further evidence of political concern. Kim Jong-un’s significant weight loss was noted earlier this year and tied to potential health issues: either the Supreme Leader was suffering from a serious condition or was seeking to avoid suffering from a serious condition. However, argued Pollack, “It seems clearer than ever that his former corpulence had become a political liability: We might infer that hunger is already reaching into the regime’s base of support, and is not confined to the countryside.” Kim’s presumed desire to avoid his father’s early death still seems a more plausible motive, but if widespread malnutrition and starvation persist, the old meme of “Kim Fatty the Third,” as waggish Chinese netizens called him until censored by Beijing, might become more politically damaging.

Finally, Kim's failure to pay much attention to the United States or South Korea suggests a lack of interest in sanctions relief—or, more accurately, a lack of belief that it is likely. As NKNews' Chad O'Carroll and Chaewon Chung observed, "The absence of foreign policy was stark: The report reserved more space for Kim Jong-un's thoughts on school uniform policy than goals in dealing with South Korea and the U.S."

That in turn indicates that Kim is likely to proceed with his ambitious armament program. The party report concluded: "The military environment of the Korean peninsula and the trend of the international situation getting instable day after day demand that bolstering the state defense capability be further powerfully propelled without a moment's delay." Although it is difficult to separate his military wish list from reality, Kim's rhetoric suggests that he will do his best to turn the former into the latter.

There isn't much good from the latest WPK plenum for the DPRK, South Korea, or America. However, the lack of incendiary rhetoric and threats may foreshadow relative international quiet for at least a time as Kim focuses on meeting domestic challenges. Moreover, Beijing's presumed backing may depend on the North's relative forbearance, at least when it comes to nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests.

The ROK and US should continue to press for engagement but do so without any illusions. With Pyongyang and Washington preoccupied with domestic problems, both sides might end up playing an updated version of "strategic patience." Although hardly a satisfactory outcome, it would be better than another round of "fire and fury."

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