The Eighth WPK DPRK Congress

From January 5 to January 13, the 8th congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) was held in North Korea, which marked a series of major inner-party and inner-state changes.

Background

The decision to hold the eighth party congress in January 2021 was made at the plenum of the WPK Central Committee held in Pyongyang on August 19, where the North Korean leader noted that the country “faced unexpected and inevitable challenges,” and that the current five-year plan, which was unveiled at the seventh party congress held in May 2016, was not implemented, and the lives of people “facing severe internal and external situations” had not improved. Therefore, it was proposed at the Eighth Congress of the WPK to analyze “in a comprehensive, three-dimensional and anatomical way the deviations and shortcomings”.

The ROK experts saw it only as “it is rare for the North’s leader to acknowledge a policy failure.” Few have noted that the reason also is that much effort and resources have been spent on “unplanned” problems such as fighting the coronavirus or rebuilding flood-stricken areas.

One gets the impression that in 2020 the party bureaucracy was not fulfilling its role as moral vanguard. Because of this, a serious audit of the ruling system was attempted in the run-up to the congress.
As Kim Jong-un said in his opening speech on January 5, “The Party Central Committee set up a non-permanent central control committee and sent its groups to the grassroots to get acquainted with the situation there and listen to the voice of the workers.” The inspection groups visited the branch departments and as a result the auditors found out “what were the mistakes in the implementation of the decisions of the 7th Party Congress, what were the reasons, what were the shortcomings in the party leadership.”

At the same time, complaints and suggestions were collected from departments of the Party Central Committee and all party organizations of the country, revision of the situation with party finances, and study of the Party Statute for outdated formulations that do not correspond to our real reality.

**Member List**

The eighth congress was held as an unusually massive event. While at the previous congress there were 3,667 delegates, at this one there were 5,000 delegates, only 250 of whom belonged to the leading party ranks. Plus 2,000 observers compared to 1,387 at the last forum.

The change in the percentage of delegates by category is also intriguing. The number of party activists classified as “exempt workers” fell from 42.13% to 39.18%, and the number of workers’ organization workers fell from 1.42% to 0.88%.

The number of non-partisan military delegates also dropped sharply, from 19.61% to 8.16%. While about 30 “honorary elders” participated as delegates at the last convention, several comrades were present only as guests of honor at this one.

But the number of representatives of administrative and economic activists increased from 11.54% to 16.02%; party activists not released from the main work - from 21.43% to 29.10%; workers in science, education, culture, art, etc. - from 3.05% to 6.66%. The proportion of women among the delegates rose from 8.59% to 10.02%.

This change is a consequence of several trends that were evident even before the congress. The first is a definite reduction in the influence of the military. Although Kim Jong-un constantly praises members of the military and the KPA performs not only military but also national economic tasks, the 2016-2020 constitutional amendments finally ended the period of military priority policy and the term “Songun” is hardly mentioned.

The second trend is a certain aversion of the leader of the country to the party bureaucracy and his reliance on the masses of the people in the form of primary organizations. A landmark moment here was Kim Jong-un’s speech during the celebration of the Labor Party’s 75th anniversary, at which not a single eulogy was uttered in honor of the party itself.

**Sequence of Events**

Compared with the previous congress, the eighth congress was clearly not a formal event held for the sake of appearances. Whereas the last forum took four days, this one has taken eight.

From the opening speech, Kim Jong-un immediately set a goal: we gathered not so much to describe achievements, but also to comprehensively analyze failures, so that something like this would not happen again. From the first to the third day, Kim Jong-un delivered his report to the Party Central Committee. The fourth and fifth days were spent on debates, and if one were to translate their description from North Korean officialdom into ordinary language, “The speakers mentioned successes and experiences in their industries and units ... seriously analyzed and summarized the shortcomings, their causes and lessons learned from them.” Many gave self-critical analyses of mistakes, describing “the failure to apply valid and popular methods in Party work.”

It is also important that those who “confessed their mistakes before the Party Congress” did not turn out to be repressed enemies of the people. Rather, they “once again thoughtfully took the criticized issues as their shortcomings and lessons,” and engaged in developing tactics for the future.

In addition to the report of the Central Committee, the Report of the Central Audit Commission of the WPK was read, which “meaningfully analyzed and summarized the successes, experiences, shortcomings and lessons in the work of the Party on financial management.” As a result, it was decided “to further strengthen party financial discipline and to make a new revolution in the work of financial management.”

In addition, the congress solemnly adopted a resolution “On Consistent Implementation of the Tasks Outlined in the Report of the WPK Central Committee,” adopted amendments to the Party Statute, and elected Kim Jong-un as
Secretary General. The composition of the Central Committee was significantly renewed, but the leader’s sister, contrary to expectations, was not in the Politburo, although during the event she made another scathing comment about the South.

The congress closed on January 12 with the singing of the “International” instead of the WPK anthem.

Some expected that Kim’s harsh language would lead to demonstrative repressions, especially after his passage that the news of the congress “dealt a tangible blow to reactionary forces of all hues and guises, hostile to our great cause.” This was taken as a hint that the said forces were also within the WPK, but there was no new Jang Song-thaek case. A good sign: at the congress they decided not to look for the switch-tenders, but to repair the tracks.

Then the festivities began. On January 13 a big concert took place at the Pyongyang Sports Palace and on the evening of January 14 a military parade with fireworks and new rockets was held in Pyongyang.

Meanwhile, Kim’s birthday on January 8 went unnoticed once again: against the background of a detailed report on the congress, the North Korean media made no mention of the leader’s 37th birthday.

Kim Jong-un’s Statements

The resolutions of the congress have not yet been leaked to the public, but Kim’s opening and closing remarks, as well as a summary of his report to the Central Committee, are available, and even from them it is possible to derive much that is unusual and interesting.

Kim Jong-un’s report took nine hours of reading, and is said to have been a very detailed “debriefing,” mentioning specific facts and names. For those who were not at the congress, the KCNA published an abridged version, but even that shows the main direction of the leader’s thought.

The report consisted of four parts: an outline of the successes achieved during the reporting period, indications for the future, and those devoted to economic and internal political issues, foreign policy and the development of party work.

The first part acknowledged “serious shortcomings that hinder further progress.” Moreover, these shortcomings were not referred to as “isolated manifestations,” but as serious problems, to combat which a total audit of both the party and the administrative system was carried out by the Extraordinary Revision Commission.

Of course, despite a succession of “hitherto unprecedented worst difficulties,” the Party “has won titanuc victories,” but “it must be said that the tasks previously set have fallen far short in almost every sphere of life,” and “the challenges that hinder and impede efforts and advance in the struggle to win continuous new victories in socialist construction are still making themselves felt.” Nevertheless, “these problems may well be corrected and solved by one’s own mind and strength.”

The second part of the report was called “For Radical Advancement in the Construction of Socialism.” It was only noted here that Kim made a detailed analysis, “focusing on the shortcomings and the lesson, setting important tasks for further new progress and development.” To summarize the lengthy section, the task of economic development in the new environment is reduced to maintaining at least the level of economic development that was achieved over the past 8-10 years when modernizing certain areas (for example, the Pyongyang subway is being modernized); the quality of life is to be improved not so much through new goods as through infrastructure, housing, local government development, and so on.

In the field of military development (it is worth noting that in both the report and the closing speech, this section comes after the economic section), Kim noted that the nuclear missile shield must be improved, and set a number of ambitious but achievable goals, like building a nuclear submarine and hypersonic weapons: “There is no more foolish act” than resting on one’s laurels while the other side arms itself.

The third section was devoted to external relations. Noting the development of relations with the PRC, the Russian Federation and the former Soviet Bloc, Kim emphasized that the hostile policy of the United States does not change with changes in the presidents. Of course, the report notes that the diplomatic route is not completely rejected, but Northerners will not be the first to move toward consensus. Responding with force for force and good for good, they will adhere to the old principles of step-by-step action in response to action, and expect from the other side not ceremonial measures, but real proposals that can revive the dialogue and give ground for negotiations.

Regarding South Korea, it was stated that the level of inter-Korean relations had returned to the times before the
Panmunjom Declaration was signed. The author can agree with this point of view, because if one were to analyze the implementation of the agreements, with the exception of border demilitarization, all the projects were drowned in delays due to Seoul’s fault. What is now being pathetically proposed by the South is either irrelevant or of purely ceremonial importance. Most likely, the North understands that the last year of Moon Jae-in’s rule is unlikely to be marked by breakthrough events. If anything, it will be as useful as the 2007 inter-Korean summit. But here, too, it is noted that everything depends on Seoul. “Results come at the cost of the effort invested.”

The fourth section was devoted to strengthening the role of the party, and the outcome of this part of the report was reflected in changes to the WPK Statute. In addition to renaming the post of party chairman to general secretary and designating the Korean People’s Army as the armed forces of the party, a meeting of party cell secretaries and a meeting of primary party organization secretaries will be called every five years between congresses. Thus, there is a direct channel of interaction between “sky” and “earth”.

Significant is the emergence of a new body, the Central Revision Commission, and the increased powers of local revision commissions indicate that internal control is being strengthened and a special new structure, similar to China’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, will watch over discipline and morality among party members.

Kim Jong-un’s closing speech left many in mixed feelings. On the one hand, the leader clearly sees the problems. In particular, Kim openly said that “in provincial towns and counties, particularly in the countryside, life remains very hard and underdeveloped.”

The strategy, however, is not presented in the final speech, nor are there any new slogans. Kim himself suggested that “instead of some loud slogan, these three ideals — “worship the people as the sky,” “unity and cohesion,” and “self-reliance” — should once again be imprinted in the depths of one’s heart.”

Specific recommendations boil down to well-known general words like “strengthening discipline” and “taking action.”

In Conclusion

To summarize everything written above, it could be said that the last congress does reflect the new course of the leadership, aimed primarily at restoring order within the party system. On the one hand, this was due to the need to prepare for the coming period of “bad years” related to the consequences of the pandemic and the international situation; on the other hand, it was due to dissatisfaction among the top leadership that the party members were not performing the function of the moral vanguard. They see the solution in tightening the screws by expanding the fight for morality and increasing pressure on private business, as well as strengthening discipline, including the creation of a new structure that would serve as a “party counterintelligence.”

However, there was no revision of the leadership role of the party, and the WPK remains in its former place, without dragging some forces and resources from the party apparatus to the state apparatus. Under the Kim Il-sung’s and Kim Jong-il’s ideas, the party could only be in the ruling position. At the same time, the authorities are trying to ensure that the quality of life of citizens is not reduced, but it is going to be achieved not so much by increasing the number of goods, but by making the living conditions easier.

As for foreign policy, although the North is still willing to reciprocate with good, they do not intend to be the first to make any unrequited moves. Washington and Seoul are expected to make real proposals and counter concessions, but the North is also ready to demonstrate a tough approach.

Konstantin Asmolov, PhD in History, leading research fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of the Far East at the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.
