The Development of North Korea’s Main Policy

With the situation on the Korean Peninsula growing worse, news about the plenary session of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea held on March 31 and the planning session of the Supreme Peoples Assembly on April 1 received very little attention. Even the appointment of a new prime minister was reported as though Kim Jong-un’s personnel reshuffle was sudden and unplanned.

Meanwhile, these events and the speeches Kim Jong-un delivered at them reveal quite a bit about the development of the new leader’s main policy, and they are vital to understanding the logic behind North Korea’s actions and motives in the current situation.

First of all, he carefully stressed its continuity with current policies. The attendees observed a minute of silence in memory of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-Il, adopted a law about the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun (the leaders’ mausoleum and a museum housing gifts they received), and, as though asking the blessing of his ancestors, the young leader visited the memorial complex accompanied by members of the Politburo and the Workers’ Party Central Military Commission prior to the plenary session.

Second, Pyongyang took a tough stance: “Only by possessing nuclear weapons can we frustrate attempts by the United States to annex the Korean Peninsula by force of arms” and “defend our ideology, our social system and all our socialist gains, and our country’s right to exist.” North Korea’s leaders understand that an iconic arms race and attempts to catch up to the United States and South Korea in conventional arms will only impoverish the country. Under the current circumstances, therefore, the decisive role goes to nuclear deterrence, which they plan to increase with more precise and smaller nuclear weapons and delivery means. The remainder of the military “must improve its combat methods and operational plans consistent with enhancing the leading role of the nuclear forces in all aspects of military deterrence and strategy, and they must also maintain the nuclear forces in a state of constant combat readiness.”

North Korea’s status as a nuclear state was enshrined in its constitution, and the decree “On Consolidating the Position of Nuclear Weapons State for Defense,” and the law “On Space Exploration” was approved in conjunction with establishment of the State Space Agency. Kim Jong-un stressed that the current international situation prevents denuclearization: “The nuclear weapons of Songun Korea are not a commodity that we want to exchange for dollars, and they are especially not subject to political or economic haggling over a negotiating table for those who want to disarm the DPRK. Our nuclear weapons are vitally important to the nation and are a national treasure of a unified Korea, and we will not discard or exchange them for billions in gold while imperialism remains on the earth and nuclear threats continue to exist.” In light of this, articles by several South Korean experts saying that North Korea’s nuclear capability will not disappear after unification (which they see as absorption by the South) are very interesting.

Third, it is clear that they are striving to solve their economic problems and are putting them on a par with measures to ensure their country’s security and sovereignty. As North Korea’s leader said, the Party’s strategy will be both “to simultaneously implement economic reconstruction and to qualitatively and quantitatively strengthen its nuclear
Strange as it may seem, this economic policy actually “makes it possible to further strengthen the country’s defensive capabilities while simultaneously directing more resources to the economy without increasing military spending and while keeping costs low.” The fact is that the nuclear option is cheaper than totally reequipping the military with conventional arms, and it enables more resources to be put into the other sectors of the economy than would be possible with defense spending structured the usual way. Especially considering the cost of modern high-technology weapons.

So the passage, “relying on the self-defense forces of military deterrence created by enormous labor throughout entire lives of the great Generalissimos to concentrate resources on economic development and ensure a prosperous life for the people without making them tighten their belts further” does not look like demagoguery.

Kim Jong-un especially noted the importance of “maximizing development of the leading sectors of the economy,” including light industry and agriculture, to improve people’s lives. He called these sectors “priority areas for developing into an economic power.” Electric power, the coal industry and rail transportation are among these basic sectors.

He also stressed the need to solve North Korea’s most important energy problems by “developing its nuclear industry through its own efforts.” That is another important point. Indeed, the development of nuclear power is a panacea for both the North and the South.

Kim Jong-un also called attention to the need to develop space technologies (“We need to launch modern satellites, including communications satellites.”) and “employ computers and robots to automate industrial processes, especially in the nuclear industry.”

The young leader’s plans are reflected in his personnel changes, especially in the appointment of Pak Pong-ju as Prime Minister. He is reputed to be a good economist and, if the rumors are correct, he is a technocrat and supports some types of change.

The current foreign policy situation was taken very seriously and viewed through the prism of a “ring of fire”: “...Our enemies, fearing the steady forward movement of our military and our people to a final victory, are making frantic attempts to suffocate and isolate the DPRK by mobilizing all political, economic and military resources, and that moved the situation to a prewar stage.” He believes their chief opponent is America, whose goal is to — “dismantle the DPRK’s nuclear weapons and ‘overthrow its regime’ by any means necessary.” In this context, the UN sanctions are seen as “a harsh and hostile act to deprive a sovereign state of its legitimate right to launch spacecraft” — and nuclear testing is seen as a necessary measure for self-defense. “Since the United States, the world’s greatest nuclear power, constitutes a constant nuclear threat, the DPRK is forced to rely even more on the nuclear sword and to strengthen its nuclear forces both qualitatively and quantitatively.”

In his report to the plenary session, Kim Jong-un particularly stressed that “we can never forget the bitter lesson of the countries of the Balkan Peninsula and the Middle East, which, counting on the assistance of other states, did not develop powerful self-defense capabilities and, yielding to the pressure and deception of the imperialists, gave up their previous military deterrence capabilities and, in the end, became the victims of the aggression.”

Kim Jong-un is convinced that the strategic course taken by the Workers’ Party of Korea will transform the DPRK into a “great political, military and socialist economic state and a highly civilized country.”

Well, we shall see how that turns out.

Konstantin Asmolov, Cand. Sc. (History), is a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Far Eastern Studies. This article was written expressly for New Eastern Outlook.