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North Korea Briefing

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Edited by
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About 38 North

38 North is an authoritative source of policy and technical analysis regarding North Korea's internal and external affairs. It aims to facilitate an informed public policy debate about peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and provide policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders with data and insights that may enhance understanding of one of the world's most complex security dilemmas.

About North Korea Briefing

The Stimson Center's 38 North is pleased to publish the third volume of *North Korea Briefing*, a quarterly report analyzing North Korea's internal dynamics.

The impact of North Korea's actions is increasingly felt far beyond its borders, as it defies political and economic norms and challenges regional and global security. However, the opaque nature of the country and regime makes it one of the most difficult intelligence targets to assess. Perhaps for this reason, discussions about North Korea often center around its foreign relations and prospects for engagement, without delving deeper into key factors that shape the leadership's current and future intentions on such issues.

This report aims to fill in some of that void by analyzing North Korean state-run media's rhetoric and signaling across five key issue areas: politics, leadership, the economy, weapons of mass destruction, and foreign policy (including inter-Korean relations).

We hope this provides useful insights into the various domestic factors that reflect or feed into the regime's strategic calculus to enhance public discourse on this important intelligence challenge.

For comments or feedback on this product, contact us at 38north@stimson.org.

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Scope and Methodology

This volume covers events and developments in North Korea during the first quarter of 2026 (January 1 to March 31) across five issue areas: politics, leadership, the economy, missiles and weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and foreign policy. Each issue area, or chapter, is scoped out as follows:

Politics: Broader leadership trends, domestic political developments, and shifts in rhetoric on key ideological or domestic policy issues

Leadership: Roles and functions of Party, government, and military institutions, power dynamics within the leadership, and personnel changes

Economy: Domestic economic indicators, economic policy, and external economic relations

Missiles and WMD: Missile, nuclear and other WMD-related activities, key technological advancements, and related policy

Foreign policy: Positions on key international and foreign policy issues and foreign relations

All chapters use North Korean state media as their primary source, aided by secondary sources such as reporting from third-country media outlets and think tank analyses.

Executive Summary

Politics: In the lead-up to the Ninth Party Congress, Kim Jong Un criticized cadre incompetence across both the industrial and agricultural sectors, reflecting a tendency to deflect blame for the limitations of his self-reliance policy. The Ninth Party Congress report presented a goal of achieving the “overall development of socialism” by 2035 and announced a new five-year plan. The report, a summary and not the full text of Kim Jong Un’s “report” to the Party Congress, offered no detail of any new or substantive measures to improve the economy, addressing only reinforced internal control, self-reliance, and mass mobilization. The subsequent First Session of the 15th Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) built on the Party Congress’s decisions by reelecting Kim Jong Un as the head of the State Affairs Commission and adopting measures to implement the new five-year economic plan.

Leadership: The first quarter of 2026 saw follow-on events to the Ninth Party Congress. North Korea held national elections for the 15th SPA on March 15, its first parliamentary elections in seven years and two years behind schedule. Following his replacement as director of Bureau 10, formerly the United Front Department, during the Party Congress, Ri Son Gwon took on leadership positions at one of the DPRK’s (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or North Korea) satellite parties. Finally, one of Kim Jong Un’s closest advisers, Jo Yong Won, was elevated to head the SPA itself.

Economy: North Korea held completion ceremonies in January for the Wonsan General Fishing Implements Factory and District 1 of Aedo Tideland, both aimed at boosting food production under the five-year plan and overseen by the cabinet. At a completion ceremony for the first-stage modernization project at the Ryongsong Machine Complex in January, Kim Jong Un publicly dismissed Cabinet Vice Premier Yang Sung Ho on the spot for working in a “slipshod way,” a striking display of the leader’s intolerance for underperformance and false reporting among senior cadres. Between January 29 and February 9, groundbreaking ceremonies were held across 20 regions for construction projects under the 20x10 regional development plan, now in its third year. Once this year’s projects are complete, new facilities will have been built in 30 percent of North Korea’s local administrative districts, though whether local officials can effectively leverage this infrastructure to revitalize their regional economies remains an open question.

Missiles and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD): The Ninth Party Congress in February committed North Korea to building more nuclear weapons and more existing-type nuclear delivery systems. The report singled out the dual-capable KN-25 short-range ballistic missile (SRBM), which the North launched in January and March from a new road-mobile launcher (50 of which were presented to Kim Jong Un in mid-February) and reportedly incorporated a new guidance system. The report also endorsed the “nuclear weaponization of naval surface forces.” Shortly after the Congress, 11 nuclear-capable land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs) were launched over two days in March from the North’s first new destroyer-type warship, now undergoing sea trials. In addition to meeting Pyongyang’s nuclear expansion goals, further KN-25 and LACM deployments bolster conventional strike capabilities against South Korea that the Congress report said needed to be “greatly increased.”

Foreign Policy: At the Ninth Party Congress, Kim Jong Un signaled a more assertive and secretive foreign policy posture, claiming that North Korea now stands at the center of a multipolar world and vowing to expand its international influence while keeping adversaries in the dark. In the wake of the Middle East crisis, Kim appeared intent on demonstrating that North Korea, unlike Iran, possesses credible military deterrence, overseeing cruise missile tests and calling for “peace with strength” while deepening anti-Western alignment with Russia and Belarus. North Korea also is likely to gradually expand economic cooperation with China, though political calculations on both sides will likely keep the pace measured. Meanwhile, Kim Yo Jong’s rebuff of Japan’s interest in a bilateral summit seems to underscore Pyongyang’s confidence in its enhanced international standing.

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In the order of authored chapters



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From Party Congress to Supreme People's Assembly: Kim's Power Consolidation, Self-Reliance Strategy, and New Five-Year Plan

In the lead-up to the Ninth Party Congress, Kim Jong Un criticized cadre incompetence across both the industrial and agricultural sectors, reflecting a tendency to deflect blame for the limitations of his self-reliance policy. The Ninth Party Congress report presented a goal of achieving the “overall development of socialism” by 2035 and announced a new five-year plan. The report, a summary and not the full text of Kim Jong Un’s “report” to the Party Congress, offered no detail of any new or substantive measures to improve the economy, addressing only reinforced internal control, self-reliance, and mass mobilization. The subsequent First Session of the 15th Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) built on the Party Congress’s decisions by reelecting Kim Jong Un as the head of the State Affairs Commission (SAC) and adopting measures to implement the new five-year economic plan.

Sharp Criticism of Problems in Socialist Construction Ahead of the Ninth Party Congress

In the run-up to the Ninth Party Congress, cadre accountability and the policy shortcomings of Kim Jong Un’s predecessors were brought into sharp focus. In January and February 2026, Kim used his speeches at the inaugural ceremonies for the first-stage modernization project of the Ryongsong Machine Complex and the Samgwang Livestock Farm to highlight two main problems in socialist construction: the incompetence and irresponsibility of officials, and the failures of “past” rural policies, an implicit criticism of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.¹ He lambasted Party and cabinet officials for defeatism, irresponsibility, passivity, and self-preservation, arguing that these attitudes had prevented work from being carried out properly. He also pointed out that past rural construction efforts were nothing more than empty, unenforceable slogans.

¹ The Ryongsong Machine Complex is a special-grade enterprise with approximately 10,000 employees, located in the Ryongsong District of Hamhung City, South Hamgyong Province. The complex serves as the parent enterprise of the machine-building industry and is known as the “mother factory.” Its main products include power generation equipment, iron and steel production equipment, cement equipment, chemical engineering equipment, cast and forged products, and other machine tools.

Context and Implications

In his two speeches, Kim Jong Un raised the same concerns across different sectors, industry and agriculture, revealing that serious problems persist in the socialist construction process.

He attributed the problems of socialist construction to the officials themselves, placing responsibility squarely on their shoulders. His criticism of the cadres reflects a tendency to assign blame for the limitations of his self-reliance policy to officials rather than to his own strategic misjudgments. References to external factors, such as the COVID-19 border closure and UN Security Council sanctions, or his own strategic decisions were conspicuously limited. This represents a classic response aimed at managing internal discontent and maintaining regime stability at a time when economic growth is clearly constrained. Kim Jong Un's criticism of Kim Il Sung's and Kim Jong Il's policies is also intended to further consolidate his absolute grip on power.

Ninth Party Congress's Socialist Development Strategy and Its Limitations²

At the Ninth Party Congress, North Korea set a goal of achieving the “overall development of socialism” by 2035 and announced a second-stage five-year plan (2026-2030). The Party Congress defined the period of the new five-year plan as “a phase of stabilization and consolidation, a phase of gradual and qualitative development.” It presented the “three revolutions”—ideological, technological, and cultural—and self-reliance as the central guiding principles for the implementation of the new five-year plan.³

Context and Implications

Based on North Korea's summary report of Kim's “report” to the Party Congress, the Workers' Party presented a development strategy that relies on mass mobilization, such as tightened discipline and ideological work, rather than offering substantive solutions like working to have sanctions lifted or pursuing market-oriented measures.

As the self-reliance line is grounded in state control, Kim Jong Un's absolute power and Party-centered governance will be further reinforced. To start, the Ninth Party Congress defined Kim Jong Un as a leader (suryong) who has fulfilled century-old aspirations that the two previous leaders failed to achieve. Furthermore, North Korea will further strengthen the Party through the five-point Party-building program, which emphasizes Party leadership and discipline.

² For more on this author's initial assessment of the Ninth Party Congress, see Rachel Minyoung Lee, Kibum Han, Vann H. Van Diepen, Gyeong Seob Oh, Michael Madden and Mitsuhiro Mimura, “Expert Takes on North Korea's Ninth Party Congress,” *38 North*, February 27, 2026, <https://www.38north.org/2026/02/expert-takes-on-north-koreas-ninth-party-congress/>.

³ The “three revolutions” are Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il's socialist development strategy, devised to advance socialist construction through the ideological remolding of Party members and the people, along with mass mobilization campaigns, in response to international isolation and economic crisis in the 1970s.

In conclusion, the Party Congress's socialist development strategy maintains a closed self-reliance model, one that pursues economic development through reinforced internal control, self-reliance, and mass mobilization, apparently without any prospects of working toward the lifting of sanctions against North Korea. Economic results achieved through this strategy will be limited. On the other hand, this strategy, aimed at strengthening Kim Jong Un's power and Party-centered governance, is highly likely to contribute to maintaining political stability in North Korea.

First Session of the 15th SPA Held⁴

North Korea convened the First Session of the 15th SPA on March 22, 2026. The SPA reelected Kim Jong Un as the chairman of the State Affairs Commission (rendered in North Korea's official English as "president of the State Affairs"), elected state leadership bodies, amended and supplemented the constitution, and adopted an ordinance on implementing the new five-year economic plan put forward by the Ninth Party Congress.

Context and Implications

Reelected as the SAC chairman, the top leadership position of the state, Kim Jong Un will present new lines and policies while continuing to criticize those of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Along these lines, North Korea will emphasize Kim Jong Un's ideas and further bolster his cult of personality to consolidate his absolute power.

North Korea underscored the responsibility and role of the cabinet, as per Cabinet Premier Pak Thae Song's remarks during the SPA session that socialist economic construction will be carried out under "the guidance and management by the Cabinet-Responsibility System, Cabinet-Centred System." The cabinet-responsibility system is Kim Jong Un's strategy to evade accountability for economic construction, meaning he will not bear responsibility for economic outcomes himself but will instead limit his role to holding the cabinet accountable.

Kim Jong Un emphasized the legitimacy of his socialist construction strategy, which centers on strengthening nuclear forces and the country's self-reliance—both prerequisites for appealing to the population to endure the hardships of persistent UN Security Council sanctions, and for suppressing the discontent of cadres and the people.

A significant change within the cabinet is the transfer of the SEC, which oversees the defense industry, under the cabinet's jurisdiction. This appears to be an effort to place both the civilian economy and the munitions industry under the cabinet premier's control. However, it remains uncertain whether the cabinet premier will be able to effectively exercise control over the SEC, which had previously operated with relative independence. Furthermore, as long as Pyongyang maintains its policy of prioritizing the munitions industry, the practice of allocating the cabinet's limited resources preferentially to that sector will not change.

⁴ This segment was previously published in Rachel Minyoung Lee, Gyeong Seob Oh, Mitsuhiro Mimura and Kibum Han, "Expert Takes on Opening Session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly," *38 North*, March 25, 2026, <https://www.38north.org/2026/03/expert-takes-on-opening-session-of-the-15th-supreme-peoples-assembly/>.

In his policy speech, Kim Jong Un put forward measures to strengthen control over the population, including reinforcing the lowest administrative units—the *dong* (neighborhood unit) and *inminban* (“people’s units”)—and establishing a police force. At the same time, Kim proposed measures to alleviate public discontent with the regime, instructing the *dong* and *inminban* to “eliminate such practices as imposing extra economic burdens on the inhabitants and fostering discontent,” and calling on party cadres to combat abuse of power, bureaucratism, and other anti-people practices. These measures are intended to suppress popular unrest and pro-South Korea sentiment fueled by the spread of outside information, as well as discontent stemming from economic hardship under prolonged UN sanctions. North Korea will intensify the detection and punishment of non-socialist behavior, including the influx and spread of outside information.

This chapter was originally drafted in Korean. The initial translation was produced using AI tools and subsequently reviewed word-for-word and refined by a bilingual subject-matter expert to ensure accuracy and readability.

Leadership

Michael Madden

Post-Party Congress Elections



Senior North Korean officials (front to back) Kim Jae Ryong, Kim Tok Hun and Kim Pyong Ho vote at the Chonsong Youth Coal Mine on March 15, 2026. (Photo: KCTV)

The first quarter of 2026 saw follow-on events to the Ninth Party Congress.¹ North Korea held national elections for the 15th Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) on March 15, its first parliamentary elections in seven years and two years behind schedule. Following his replacement as director of Bureau 10, formerly the United Front Department (UFD), during the Party Congress, Ri Son Gwon took on leadership positions at one of the DPRK’s (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or North Korea) satellite parties.² Finally, one of Kim Jong Un’s closest advisers, Jo Yong Won, was elevated to head the SPA itself.

¹ For this author’s assessments of the leadership changes at the Ninth Party Congress, see Michael Madden, “Quick Take: Initial Assessment of Key Personnel Changes in North Korea’s 9th Party Congress,” *38 North*, February 25, 2026, <https://www.38north.org/2026/02/quick-take-initial-assessment-of-key-personnel-changes-in-north-koreas-9th-party-congress/>.

² Satellite parties refer to North Korea’s two political parties, other than the WPK, which send representatives to the SPA. Prior to 2024, the three parties (the WPK, the KSDP and the Chondoist Chongo Party) formed the Democratic Front for the Reunification for the Fatherland.

Supreme People's Assembly Elections Held

For the first time in seven years, the DPRK held national elections for its unicameral parliament, the SPA. Kim Jong Un voted at a coal mine in the Suncheon Youth Coal Mining Complex in South Phyongan Province. The elections were two years overdue, as the SPA lasts five years. This may have been to align SPA elections to the years of a Party Congress, but could also be due to self-declared crises and national emergencies in 2021 and 2022. One theory is just as good as the other.

The 15th SPA might formalize any legal changes and, via budget control, implement any government policies resulting from the Party Congress and the Central Committee apparatus elected therein.

Context and Implications

Kim Jong Un's choice to cast his SPA ballot at one of the country's major coal mines reiterates the Ninth Party Congress' emphasis on domestic economic development. His appearance and speech may have also been meant to be a subtle message to North Korean citizens that the country's "self-sufficient" economy can be immune from the high energy prices caused by geopolitical problems such as the recent attack on Iran.

Coal is one of North Korea's viable exports. Opting to appear at the Suncheon Area Coal Mining Complex may foreshadow Sino-North Korean interactions during 2026 with an eye toward boosting coal exports to China, the largest purchaser of North Korean coal.

Former UFD Boss Crosses Over to Satellite Party

Ri Son Gwon, former head of the #3 Office Complex (the bureaucratic units tasked on inter- and diaspora Korean issues) and former UFD director, was elected to the 15th SPA as a member of the Korea Social Democratic Party (KSDP) and during the SPA's opening session on March 22, Ri was elevated to vice chairman of the SPA Standing Committee. Along with Chondoist Chongu Party, the KSDP is one of two satellite parties which elect SPA deputies. Both satellite parties are technically subordinate to the former UFD. According to some South Korean reporting, the former UFD might now be called "Bureau 10," but no further reporting has neither substantiated nor corroborated if that is the institutional name.

Context and Implications

During the Ninth Party Congress, Ri Son Gwon was replaced by another former UFD Director Jang Kum Chol as head of the former UFD. Jang was observed at a Party Congress sideline policy meeting with the other two top officials for external affairs—Party Secretary for International Affairs Kim Song Nam and Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui.

Ri Son Gwon's migration to the KSDP placed him in the 15th SPA's leadership as Vice Chairman of the SPA Standing Committee, despite the KSDP's subordination to the former UFD.

Ri's appointment to the KSDP continues a trend in which the WPK exerts a heavy-handed approach to the DPRK's satellite parties. For example, during the second session of the 14th SPA, former KSDP

Chairman Kim Yong Dae was replaced on a motion initiated by the WPK. As Ri Son Gwon is a former negotiator, his SPA and KSDP appointment indicate some degree of external engagement by the regime during 2026 may be possible. This could very well take the form of Ri issuing a communique on external relations or participating in delegation visits.

Jo Yong Won Migrates to SPA Leadership

During the opening session of the 15th SPA, Jo Yong Won was elected chairman of the SPA Standing Committee. Jo is a former top aide in the personal secretariat to Kim Jong Un and his last position was Secretary and Director of the WPK Organization Guidance Department (OGD).

Context and Implications

Jo's SPA election fits into two broader personnel trends of the last 10 or so years of Kim Jong Un's leadership. At the SPA, Jo Yong Won replaces Choe Ryong Hae, a princeling of the partisan core elite cohort (North Korea's naval destroyer the *Choe Hyon* is named after Choe's father). Jo Yong Won is a self-made core elite, attaining trusted positions through accomplishment, accountability, and hard work. Jo served in administrative affairs via the OGD's local and provincial party apparatus before becoming a close aide to Kim Jong Un during his succession. He emerged in 2014 as a close aide and adviser to the leader and was mainstay in Kim Jong Un's entourage until 2025. This is almost certainly due to Jo being an effective gatekeeper and proxy who can brief the leader in candid and constructive fashion.

Jo Yong Won's migration to the SPA leadership also fits into a broader trend of core elites who hold different positions across the regime. Like his peers No Kwang Chol and Kim Jae Ryong, he has held different posts; compared to No and Kim, Jo's experience is not as diverse. However, Jo's lengthy public absence at the start of 2025 possibly involved him inspecting or working at local development projects. This type of experience familiarizes North Korean elites with the implementation and implications of strategic policy on a micro-level. It seasons core elites with holistic managerial experience. Once that experience is acquired, the individual elite can be appointed to any number of leadership positions as an effective regime manager. For Kim Jong Un this provides two benefits. First, it ensures his policies are being implemented. Secondly, it builds the institution itself.

Economy

Mitsuhiro Mimura

Construction Projects Making Headway as Part of Five-Year Plan

North Korea held completion ceremonies in January for the Wonsan General Fishing Implements Factory and District 1 of Aedo Tideland, both aimed at boosting food production under the five-year plan and overseen by the cabinet. At a completion ceremony for the first-stage modernization project at the Ryongsong Machine Complex in January, Kim Jong Un publicly dismissed Cabinet Vice Premier Yang Sung Ho on the spot for working in a “slipshod way,” a striking display of the leader’s intolerance for underperformance and false reporting among senior cadres. Between January 29 and February 9, groundbreaking ceremonies were held across 20 regions for construction projects under the 20x10 regional development plan, now in its third year. Once this year’s projects are complete, new facilities will have been built in 30 percent of North Korea’s local administrative districts, though whether local officials can effectively leverage this infrastructure to revitalize their regional economies remains an open question.¹

Cabinet-Led Push to Boost Food Production

In January, North Korea reported on the completion of two notable economic construction projects aimed at boosting food production. First, it held an inaugural ceremony for the Wonsan General Fishing Implements Factory, attended by Vice Cabinet Premier Ri Chol Man and Pak Song Guk, chief secretary of the Kangwon Provincial Party Committee. Minister of Fisheries Song Chun Sop delivered a completion address, emphasizing the importance of adopting scientific fishing systems and rational methods to drive innovation in the sector.

Next, District 1 of Aedo Tideland was inaugurated, with Vice Cabinet Premier Ri Chol Man and Kim Chol Sam, chief secretary of the North Phyongan Provincial Party Committee, attending. A ring road has been formed along seawalls connecting Sinbong-ri with Aedo-dong and Ilhae-ri, all in Jongju City, North Phyongan Province. Google Earth satellite imagery shows the embankments did not exist as of February 2025 but were nearly complete by May of that year. While actual farming remains some way off, the completion ceremony likely marks a milestone in the drainage and desalination work.

¹ For this author’s initial assessments of the Ninth Party Congress and the First Session of the 15th Supreme People’s Assembly, see Rachel Minyoung Lee, Kibum Han, Vann H. Van Diepen, Gyeong Seob Oh, Michael Madden and Mitsuhiro Mimura, “Expert Takes on North Korea’s Ninth Party Congress,” *38 North*, February 27, 2026, <https://www.38north.org/2026/02/expert-takes-on-north-koreas-ninth-party-congress/>; Rachel Minyoung Lee, Gyeong Seob Oh, Mitsuhiro Mimura and Kibum Han, “Expert Takes on Opening Session of the 15th Supreme People’s Assembly,” *38 North*, March 25, 2026, <https://www.38north.org/2026/03/expert-takes-on-opening-session-of-the-15th-supreme-peoples-assembly/>.

Context and Implications

The seniority of attendees suggests both projects are under direct cabinet oversight. The Kim Jong Un government has favored short-term, intensive construction cycles completed within a single fiscal year. Expanding cultivated land through reclamation and boosting protein supply through fisheries serves a dual purpose: increasing food production while reinforcing the legitimacy of the Workers' Party and the state. The emphasis on scientific methods and rational fishing also reflects Kim's broader push to break with outdated practices in production and build a new economic system.

Kim's Public Dismissal of a Vice Premier at Ryongsong Machine Complex

A completion ceremony for the first-stage modernization project at the Ryongsong Machine Complex was held on January 19. Kim Jong Un attended alongside senior Party and government officials, provincial officials from South Hamgyong, Complex staff, and others.

Cabinet Premier Pak Thae Song spoke at the ceremony, declaring that despite the scale and difficulty of the tasks ahead, success was inevitable if participants pressed forward with the same spirit and determination that had driven the first-stage project to completion under the Party's leadership.

Kim Jong Un also addressed the ceremony, using the occasion to publicly criticize the cabinet's performance. He charged that "the then premier of the Cabinet and the current vice-premier in charge of the machine-building industry worked in a slipshod way" and dismissed Vice Premier Yang Sung Ho on the spot. Kim clarified that he did not consider Yang disloyal to the Party, but judged him temperamentally unfit for a position of responsibility. It is also worth noting the fate of Kim Tok Hun, the former cabinet premier implicitly criticized alongside Yang in Kim Jong Un's speech. Rather than being sidelined, Kim Tok Hun was re-elected to the Politburo at a Party plenary meeting during the Ninth Party Congress and subsequently appointed both cabinet first vice premier and a member of the State Affairs Commission.

Context and Implications

The available reports do not allow a firm conclusion about what went wrong at the Ryongsong Machine Complex. Sanctions-induced shortages of intermediate and capital goods may have made renovation work impossible. Alternatively, the mandated direction of the modernization projects may have clashed with actual conditions on the ground, such as power supply constraints, leading officials to quietly disregard their instructions. It is also possible that the vice premier viewed Kim Jong Un's emphasis on integrated production systems and automation—which became a dominant policy trend under his rule—as dogmatic requirements detached from factory realities. What is clear is that Kim has a deep aversion to false reporting and views it as a bad habit among his officials.

A recent signed article in the Party daily *Rodong Sinmun* quoted Kim Jong Un as saying that mobilizing the masses would unlock unlimited reserves and yield practical solutions to adverse conditions. Though the article concerned production at small- and medium-sized coal mines, its underlying diagnosis was a deficit of Party consciousness and political awareness among Party members. The prescribed remedy was intensified criticism sessions and closer study of the Party daily. Whether such measures would translate meaningfully to a large, complex factory like the Ryongsong Machine Complex is doubtful, but if they were applied, the implication would be that motivation among cabinet officials and state enterprise managers is seriously lacking.

Groundbreaking Ceremonies Held Across 20 Regions as Part of Regional Development Policy

From January 29 through February 9, North Korea held groundbreaking ceremonies for construction projects across 20 regions under its regional development plan.² Kim Jong Un delivered a speech at the ceremony in Unryul County, South Hwanghae on January 29 and Premier Pak Tae Song spoke at the ceremony in Pyongwon County, South Phongan on January 31. A full list of ceremonies is as follows:

	County/District	City/Province	Activity Date	Note
1	Unnyul County	South Hwanghae	January 29	Kim Jong Un attended, gave a speech
2	Phyongwon County	South Phyongan	January 31	Pak Thae Song attended, gave a speech
3	Kangnam County	Pyongyang	February 3	
4	Maengsan County	South Phyongan	February 3	
5	Ragwon County	South Hamgyong	February 5	
6	Songhwa County	South Hamgyong	February 6	
7	Musan County	North Hamgyong	February 6	
8	Taean District	Nampho	February 6	
9	Phanmun District	Kaesong	February 6	
10	Sinphyong County	North Hamgyong	February 7	
11	Sonchon County	North Phyongan	February 7	
12	Pongsan County	North Hwanghae	February 8	
13	Sijung County	Jagang	February 8	
14	Sinhung County	South Hamgyong	February 8	

² “Splendid Ceremony Held to Mark Start of Regional Development Policy-oriented Construction in Unnyul County of DPRK,” *Korea News Service* (KNS), January 30, 2026, <https://koreanewsservice.com/en-news/splendid-ceremony-held-to-mark-start-of-regional-development-policy-oriented-construction-in-unnyul-county-of-dprk/>; “Groundbreaking Ceremony for Regional Development Policy-oriented Construction in Phyongwon County,” *KNS*, February 1, 2026, <https://koreanewsservice.com/en-news/groundbreaking-ceremony-for-regional-development-policy-oriented-construction-in-phyongwon-county/>; “Regional Development Policy-oriented Construction for 2026 Begins in Different Parts of DPRK,” *KNS*, February 4, 2026, <https://koreanewsservice.com/en-news/regional-development-policy-oriented-construction-for-2026-begins-in-different-parts-of-dprk/>; “Groundbreaking Ceremony for Regional Development Policy-oriented Construction Held in Ragwon County of DPRK,” *KNS*, February 6, 2026, <https://koreanewsservice.com/en-news/groundbreaking-ceremony-for-regional-development-policy-oriented-construction-held-in-ragwon-county-of-dprk/>; “Regional Development Policy-oriented Construction for 2026 Begins in Different Parts of DPRK,” *KNS*, February 7, 2026, <https://koreanewsservice.com/en-news/regional-development-policy-oriented-construction-for-2026-begins-in-different-parts-of-dprk-2/>; “Regional Development Policy-oriented Construction Begins in Sinphyong and Sonchon Counties of DPRK,” *KNS*, February 8, 2026, <https://koreanewsservice.com/en-news/regional-development-policy-oriented-construction-begins-in-sinphyong-and-sonchon-counties-of-dprk/>; “Regional Development Policy-Oriented Construction Starts in Counties of DPRK,” *KNS*, February 9, 2026, <https://koreanewsservice.com/en-news/regional-development-policy-oriented-construction-starts-in-counties-of-dprk/>; “Grand Construction Launched in More Counties of DPRK,” *KNS*, February 10, 2026, <https://koreanewsservice.com/en-news/grand-construction-launched-in-more-counties-of-dprk/>.

15	Thongchon County	Kangwon	February 8	
16	Hwaphyong County	Jagang	February 9	
17	Phyonggang County	Kangwon	February 9	
18	Riwon County	South Hamgyong	February 9	
19	Myonggan County	North Hamgyong	February 9	
20	Samsu County	Ryanggang	February 9	

Context and Implications

Construction projects under the 20x10 policy for regional development are now entering their third year. In his January 29 speech in Unnyul County, Kim Jong Un noted that once this year's work is complete, regional economy and people's livelihood projects will have reached 30 percent of North Korea's local administrative districts. The challenge is whether local governments can put these facilities to productive use. Kim's own concluding remarks at the Ninth Party Congress acknowledged that some facilities, built at considerable expense, were already being neglected and failing to operate as intended. Yet, local administrators can only be held accountable once the necessary infrastructure is actually in place. The 20x10 policy, in this sense, appears designed to eliminate excuses: by supplying the physical foundation, the state removes any justification for inaction and compels local officials to deliver on regional economic revitalization.

Missiles and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)

Vann H. Van Diepen

North Korea Tests New Theater Launch Platforms as Party Congress Continues Nuclear/Missile Buildup

The Ninth Party Congress in February committed North Korea to building more nuclear weapons and more existing-type nuclear delivery systems. The report singled out the dual-capable KN-25 short-range ballistic missile (SRBM), which the North launched in January and March from a new road-mobile launcher (50 of which were presented to Kim Jong Un in mid-February) and reportedly incorporated a new guidance system. The report also endorsed the “nuclear weaponization of naval surface forces.” Shortly after the Congress, 11 nuclear-capable land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs) were launched over two days in March from the North’s first new destroyer-type warship, now undergoing sea trials. In addition to meeting Pyongyang’s nuclear expansion goals, further KN-25 and LACM deployments bolster conventional strike capabilities against South Korea that the Congress report said needed to be “greatly increased.”

Ninth Party Congress Continues Nuclear/Missile Buildup

On February 26, North Korean media released the report on that month’s Ninth Party Congress, although with significantly fewer military specifics than provided in the previous one in January 2021.¹ What was clear, however, is that the country will continue its ongoing “very satisfactory” effort to increase the number of nuclear weapons, and “accelerate the deployment of already-developed” nuclear delivery systems. The report singled out “ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] complexes of ground and underwater launching,” the “nuclear weaponization of naval surface and underwater forces,” and reinforcing deployments of the KN-25 and other unspecified SRBMs. The new report also flagged for the first time plans for “special assets for attacking the enemy’s satellite in emergency.” (38 North previously provided additional analysis of the new report, and a rundown of how far the North got with the nuclear/missile systems specified in the 2021 report.)

Context and Implications

Pyongyang has been increasing its infrastructure to produce fissile material, missiles, and road-mobile launchers, and thus appears well configured to continue building up nuclear weapons and all range classes of ballistic missiles. The new report’s mention of ICBMs was not limited to solid-propellant systems as in 2021, possibly suggesting the parallel build-up of liquid ICBMs. (That said, on March 29 the North reported its first static (ground) test of an ICBM-class solid-propellant rocket motor since a test associated with the new Hwasong-20 solid ICBM in September 2025; as reported previously in 38 North, it is unclear which missile system the “newly upgraded,” higher-thrust motor is associated

¹ For more on this author’s initial assessment of the Ninth Party Congress, see Rachel Minyoung Lee, Kibum Han, Vann H. Van Diepen, Gyeong Seob Oh, Michael Madden and Mitsuhiro Mimura, “Expert Takes on North Korea’s Ninth Party Congress,” *38 North*, February 27, 2026, <https://www.38north.org/2026/02/expert-takes-on-north-ko-reas-ninth-party-congress/>.

with.) The nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) effort was not singled out as in 2021, but references to “underwater launching” ICBMs and the “nuclear weaponization of... underwater forces” presumably mean that program will continue.

Although the KN-25 and other SRBMs can deliver tactical nuclear and chemical weapons, they also have critical conventional roles the report recognized in the context of “greatly increas[ing] the density and durability of concentrated attack” against South Korea. In at least the near-term, the new focus on anti-satellite (ASAT) systems probably involves electronic warfare (also highlighted in the report). Pyongyang can also develop direct-ascent ASAT interceptors (although effective conventional payloads would be technically challenging) and use its existing nuclear-armed ballistic missiles in an “emergency” to attack satellites.

KN-25 SRBM Buildup Highlighted in the Run-up to Party Congress

North Korean media reported a January 27 launch of four KN-25 “large-caliber multiple-launch rockets” that had been upgraded to incorporate a new “self-steered precisely guided flight system, which can neglect any outside intervention.” The missiles were launched from a “newly-modernized” four-axle road-mobile launcher with five missile launch tubes. The upgraded missile reportedly demonstrated improved “intelligence and hitting accuracy.” Media also reported the February 18 presentation to Kim Jong Un of 50 new-type KN-25 launchers produced over two months. In an associated speech, Kim claimed the “super-precision” system “incorporates AI technology and compound guidance.” On March 14, a “firepower strike drill” featured 12 new-type launchers each firing one KN-25 in a “concentration strike” that “will be frequently conducted in the future.”

Context and Implications

KN-25s have made up the bulk of North Korea’s missile launches over the past two years, and the new Congress report clearly highlighted the system’s utility against South Korea (see above). The new 5-tube launcher (first seen in December 2025) adds to the previous 4-tube platform, and the large number of new launchers unveiled (capable of carrying 250 missiles, well in excess of the assessed size of North Korea’s nuclear stockpile) underscores the KN-25’s important potential in conventional warfare for saturating and suppressing missile/air defense systems, airbases, counterbattery radars, and other targets critical to alliance military operations. Even so, the North stated the March drill will provide “a deep understanding of the destructive power of tactical nuclear weapon.”

The new “self-steered” guidance may be an all-inertial system that does not use GPS or other external updates, perhaps prompted by the heavy use of electronic warfare in Ukraine to degrade GPS-guided munitions. Such a guidance system is unlikely to be as accurate as a GPS-aided one, especially over ranges such as the 358.5 to 364.4 km claimed for the January and March launches. (Inertial accuracy degrades with range; Pyongyang claimed in March the KN-25 could reach 420 km, and 400 km has been seen in testing.) One way to have autonomous guidance without external updates would be to incorporate a terminal radar or optical seeker (which might be part of a “compound guidance system”), but no signs of a seeker have been seen on KN-25 missiles to date. Although military AI also was highlighted in the Ninth Party Congress report, the nature of any “AI technology” in the KN-25 is unknown; possibilities range from use in the targeting system aboard the launcher, to the software for any terminal seeker, to simply being a propaganda claim.

Nuclear-Capable LACM Firings During “Shakedown” of North’s First Destroyer

North Korea’s first destroyer-type warship, the Choe Hyon, reportedly launched five Hwasal-class “strategic” land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs) on March 4 as part of the new ship’s sea trials (“shakedown”) prior to deployment. Six more LACMs were launched from the ship on March 10, reportedly using the “national integrated control system of strategic weapons.” Kim Jong Un reportedly said the North “must” build two destroyers or larger cruisers every year of the new five-year plan (2026-2030) and would step up the construction of the third Choe Hyon-class destroyer so it would be completed by the anniversary of the founding of the Korean Workers Party on October 10. (The second such ship foundered during its original launch in May 2025, was subsequently refloated, and has since been undergoing repairs.)

Context and Implications

Kim has been stressing since September 2023 the importance of deploying nuclear weapons in the navy, stating this March that the effort “is making satisfactory progress.” Putting nuclear-capable LACMs on surface ships in the near term meets this objective until the eventual potential deployment of ICBM-class missiles on SSBNs. As the United States has demonstrated in various conflicts since the 1990s, ship-launched LACMs can also fulfill useful conventional roles. Shipborne LACMs help diversify and improve the overall survivability of the overwhelmingly land-based North Korean missile force, although individual ships would be highly vulnerable to allied attack in wartime.

Analysis elsewhere has pointed out that 10 vertical launch system (VLS) hatches/launch tubes apparently sized for KN-23 SRBMs, seen farthest aft on the superstructure of the first Choe Hyon when it was launched in April 2025, were replaced with 24 smaller hatches/tubes by October 2025, and that additional VLS sections with 10 more such hatches/tubes were added to either side of them by the time of the March 2026 sea trials. This suggests that, if the North originally intended to deploy SRBMs on the Choe Hyon, it subsequently decided to rely solely on LACMs for the ship’s theater-range strike capability. Although potentially more vulnerable to defenses than KN-23s, Hwasal-class LACMs have longer range (1500-2000 km, compared to upwards of 800 km for the KN-23) that offers greater target coverage and/or the ability to deploy farther away from threats to the launch platform. Kim did not specify what the Air Force’s new nuclear role will entail, but the display implies at least some LACM launchers will be subordinated to the Air Force and equipped with all three known Hwasal missile variants. The Air Force LACMs probably will be in addition to those already under the Strategic Forces. This is probably the most sensible way to give the Air Force a nuclear role, as road-mobile LACMs are more survivable both pre-launch and in-flight than Pyongyang’s obsolescent combat aircraft, and have enough range (1,500-2,000 km) to cover all of South Korea from anywhere in the North.

The size and square cross-section of the new ALCM resemble the German-Swedish Taurus missile exported to South Korea and the Russian Kh-69. The missile’s range and payload capabilities are unknown but are probably much less than the Hwasal LACM. The new ALCM probably would be more suitable for conventional than nuclear strike missions. Future development of longer-range nuclear ALCMs cannot be ruled out, especially if the North can acquire more capable aircraft to carry them. However, air-delivered nukes will likely remain a minor player in a North Korean nuclear force dominated by road-mobile ballistic and cruise missile systems.

With Little Incentive to Engage the US, North Korea Deepens Russia and China Ties

At the Ninth Party Congress, Kim Jong Un signaled a more assertive and secretive foreign policy posture, claiming that North Korea (also the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or DPRK) now stands at the center of a multipolar world and vowing to expand its international influence while keeping adversaries in the dark.¹ In the wake of the Middle East crisis, Kim appeared intent on demonstrating that North Korea, unlike Iran, possesses credible military deterrence, overseeing cruise missile tests and calling for “peace with strength” while deepening anti-Western alignment with Russia and Belarus. North Korea also is likely to gradually expand economic cooperation with China, though political calculations on both sides will likely keep the pace measured. Meanwhile, Kim Yo Jong’s rebuff of Japan’s interest in a bilateral summit seems to underscore Pyongyang’s confidence in its enhanced international standing.

North Korea Claims “Important Changes to the Position and Influence of the DPRK”

According to North Korean media’s summary of Kim Jong Un’s report to the Ninth Party Congress—a review of the Workers’ Party’s work over the past five years—Kim claimed that “the building of a fair and just multi-polar world will be further promoted” and that North Korea stood “right at the centre of” that movement. He also stressed the need to “expand and strengthen the external prestige and influence of our state more broadly,” adding that the “Party Central Committee’s direct involvement in the external activities of the state is an essential requirement.” Notably, he emphasized the clandestine nature of external activities, saying: “Now our enemies don’t know what we’re planning and calculating. They can’t and shouldn’t know.”

¹ For this author’s initial assessments of the Ninth Party Congress and the First Session of the 15th Supreme People’s Assembly, see Rachel Minyoung Lee, Kibum Han, Vann H. Van Diepen, Gyeong Seob Oh, Michael Madden and Mitsuhiro Mimura, “Expert Takes on North Korea’s Ninth Party Congress,” *38 North*, February 27, 2026, <https://www.38north.org/2026/02/expert-takes-on-north-koreas-ninth-party-congress/>; Rachel Minyoung Lee, Gyeong Seob Oh, Mitsuhiro Mimura and Kibum Han, “Expert Takes on Opening Session of the 15th Supreme People’s Assembly,” *38 North*, March 25, 2026, <https://www.38north.org/2026/03/expert-takes-on-opening-session-of-the-15th-supreme-peoples-assembly/>.

Context and Implications

At the Eighth Party Congress in 2021, too, Kim Jong Un mentioned the need to “extensively develop the foreign relations on a par with the strategic position of our state.” However, Kim went further in his opening address to the Ninth Party Congress, playing up Pyongyang’s increased global influence by declaring that “the position of our state was firmly consolidated as an irreversible one, bringing about a great change in the global political landscape and in the influence on our state.” It is also rare for North Korea to call for the Party’s “direct guidance and involvement” and for strengthened security in the foreign policy domain considering North Korea’s “remarkably enhanced” international standing. In this context, North Korea’s diplomatic flexibility and pragmatism likely will be diminished further, as Kim Jong Un will play a more dominant role in North Korea’s external activities going forward. The covert and irregular nature of those activities will likely continue to increase, and Pyongyang will further assert its status as a self-declared “nuclear weapons state.”²

Kim Likely to Continue Flaunting Military Capabilities and Deepen Russia Ties Amid Middle East Tensions

On March 1, a North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesperson’s press statement condemned the US-Israeli airstrikes on Iran as a “shameless rogue act.” The Foreign Ministry followed up with a spokesperson’s answer to a journalist on March 10 to once again “strongly denounce the acts of aggression by the U.S. and Israel” and support Iran’s election of a new Supreme Leader.

North Korean state media have refrained from criticizing US President Donald Trump by name so far, but that does not mean talks are close. After the Party Congress, Kim Jong Un appeared to reinforce the notion that North Korea is different from Iran because it has nuclear weapons, and demonstrated those capabilities. For example, he oversaw or observed strategic cruise missile test launches conducted from the 5,000-tonne destroyer *Choe Hyon* on March 4 and 10 ahead of its commissioning, emphasizing the need to “maintain and expand the powerful and reliable nuclear war deterrent.” In his policy speech to the opening session of the 15th SPA, Kim called for “peace with strength” while referring to US “acts of state-sponsored terrorism and aggression in various parts of the world.”

Meanwhile, on March 26, Kim held a summit with visiting Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, signing a Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation and agreements on cooperation in the fields of diplomacy, information, agriculture, education, and public health.

² At the Ninth Party Congress, North Korea elevated Kim Song Nam, director of the Party’s International Department to a Party secretary. While reporting on the election of Minister of State Security Ri Chang Dae as a member of the State Affairs Commission (SAC) during the First Session of the 15th Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA), the Party daily *Rodong Sinmun* identified him as the director of the National Intelligence Bureau, indicating that the “Ministry of State Security” was renamed the “National Intelligence Bureau.” Following the close of the SPA session, Kim Jong Un posed for a commemorative photograph with North Korea’s overseas ambassadors, who had traveled to Pyongyang to attend the meeting. See “Press Release of First Plenary Meeting of Ninth Central Committee of WPK,” *Korea News Service* (KNS), February 24, 2026, <https://koreanewsservice.com/en-news/press-release-of-first-plenary-meeting-of-ninth-central-committee-of-wpk/>; “조선민주주의인민공화국 국무위원회 제1부위원장, 부위원장, 위원들 [DPRK State Affairs Commission First Vice Chairman, Vice Chairman, and Members],” *Rodong Sinmun*, March 23, 2026; “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Meets and Encourages Newly-Appointed Cabinet Members and Deputies to SPA,” *KNS*, March 24, 2026, <https://koreanewsservice.com/en-news/respected-comrade-kim-jong-un-meets-and-encourages-newly-appointed-cabinet-members-and-deputies-to-spa/>.

Context and Implications

Some analysts have argued that North Korea's restraint in reporting on the Iran situation and in criticizing Trump by name signal Kim Jong Un will adopt a positive attitude toward dialogue with the United States. In this author's view, however, North Korea's incentive to come to the negotiating table will only diminish further. This is because engaging in dialogue while still refusing to denuclearize would expose North Korea to greater pressure—whether through US follow-up actions or a further worsening of US-North Korea relations—than refusing both dialogue and denuclearization altogether.

Instead, North Korea will likely continue to demonstrate that it is different from Iran in three key respects: its status as a “nuclear weapons state,” its backing by Russia, and the geopolitical difference between the Far East and the Middle East in that both South Korea and China oppose a war. In particular, North Korea will further step up its diversification of nuclear and missile capabilities while strengthening its own defensive posture. To that end, it will likely press forward with military cooperation with Russia and reinforce the anti-Western trilateral alignment with Russia and Belarus.

North Korea to Expand China Ties While Keeping Its Pace

Unlike at the Eighth Party Congress, Kim Jong Un's “report” to the Ninth Party Congress made no explicit mention of Pyongyang's relations with Russia or China, simply remarking that it “should steadily develop the traditional relations of friendship and cooperation with neighboring countries onto a higher stage.”³ However, the Ninth Party Congress's claim that North Korea had made “remarkable achievements” in the foreign policy domain appeared intended to signal that a) the country has risen to the status of a “nuclear weapons state” on par with China and Russia, and b) its solidarity with these two nations has deepened. Though not publicized, the Party Congress is presumed to have shown off Kim Jong Un's diplomatic accomplishments, for example in Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui's [speech](#).

Context and Implications

North Korea will likely maintain its close relationship with Russia for the military reasons cited above, while expanding exchanges and cooperation with China out of economic necessity, including importing goods in short supply for the implementation of the new five-year economic plan. North Korea-China trade reached approximately \$2.73 billion in 2025, up 25 percent from the previous year, and passenger train service between Pyongyang and Beijing [resumed](#) on March 12 for the first time in six years. With its major political events now behind it, North Korea will likely gradually expand economic cooperation with China, though Pyongyang will also likely pace itself, guided by the political calculations of both leaderships. Kim Jong Un's [visit](#) to China in September 2025 and the Chinese premier's [visit](#) to Pyongyang the following month set the stage for restoring bilateral relations, but the two sides still remain at the level of the top leaders exchanging diplomatic correspondence and resident embassies trading platitudes about strengthening friendship and cooperation. Notably, Kim Jong Un's recent [speech](#) to the SPA hints at a possible recalibration of Pyongyang's relations with friendly countries, which could include China:

³ In his “[report](#)” to the Eighth Party Congress in January 2021, Kim Jong Un touted creating “a trend towards peace and the atmosphere of dialogue” with the United States, holding “five rounds of the DPRK-China summits,” and developing “friendly and cooperative relations with Russia,” which he claimed led to the “rapid development of the DPRK's external position.” He then called on “the field of foreign affairs to further develop the relations with socialist countries” over the next five years.

We should continue to improve and strengthen, from a developmental point of view, the relations with the countries with which we have traditional friendly ties in line with the requirements of the new era, and at the same time readjust and redefine diplomatic preference and adroitly translate it into practice by prioritizing our national interests on the principle of ensuring medium- and long-term and strategic national interests.

Kim Yo Jong Rebuffs Japanese Prime Minister's Desire for a Summit

In a March 23 [press statement](#), Workers' Party Department Director Kim Yo Jong responded to Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's interest in holding a North Korea-Japan summit, saying that it was "not the one that comes true, as wanted or decided by Japan." She added: "If the prime minister of Japan seeks to resolve its unilateral matter not recognized by us, our state leadership will have no intention to meet or sit face to face with her."

Context and Implications

The "unilateral matter" refers to the issue of Japanese abductees, which was [discussed](#) at the March 19 US-Japan summit. The statement's main point—that dialogue may be possible only if Japan does not raise the abductees issue—appears to reflect Pyongyang's confidence that its international standing has improved.

This chapter was originally drafted in Korean. The initial translation was produced using AI tools and subsequently reviewed word-for-word and refined by a bilingual subject-matter expert to ensure accuracy and readability.

