



North Korea's Seventh Party Congress: Significance and Responses from the Major Stakeholders

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Introduction

The ruling party of Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) - the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) held its Seventh Party Congress from May 6 to May 9, 2016 – country's biggest political meeting since 1980. More than 3,000 delegates participated in the event. The Party Congress was also witnessed by 128 foreign journalists who were granted visas to cover the event. However, only a few were permitted to attend the meeting. The Worker's Congress launched a new five-year plan to revamp the economy. Further, it 'enshrined "Byungjin" policy of simultaneous pursuit of nuclear weapons and economic development."

Following are the major reasons for Kim Jong-un's convening of the Seventh Party Congress after a gap of 36 years:

1. First, former President Kim Il Song in 1985 expressed that when people can eat rice with broth then only convene the Seventh Party Congress. In other words, when the economic condition of North Korea is stable. The party Congress is an indication to both the domestic and international audiences that economically as well as politically North Korea is secure.
2. Second, to officially announce Kim Jong-un as the supreme leader of North Korea; and,
3. Third, to further consolidate the leadership of Workers' Party.²
4. Fourth, the Workers' Congress also served as a platform for public affirmation of North Korea's nuclear capabilities.

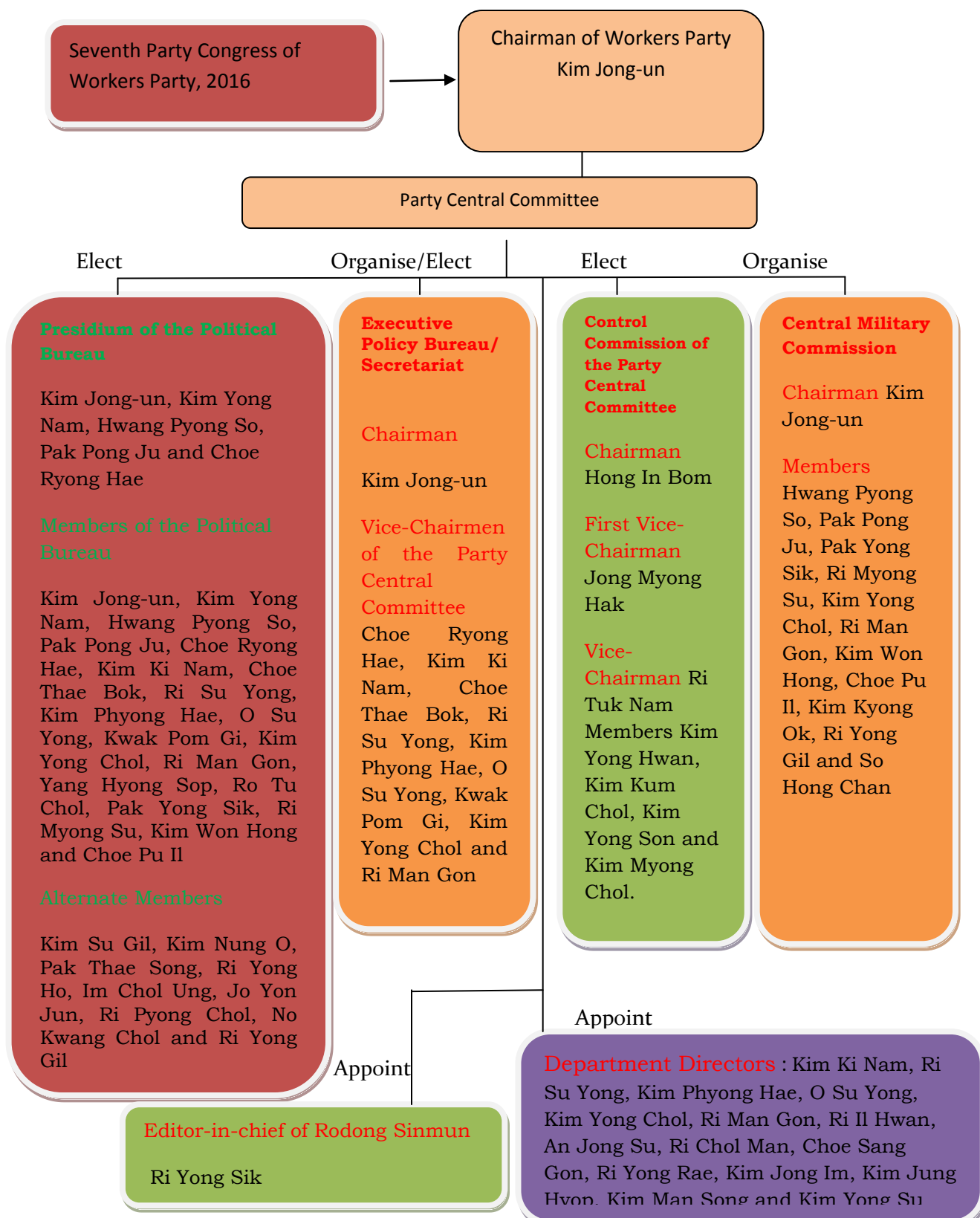
5. Finally, the Party Congress not only further enhanced Kim Jong-un's control over the party, but has also strengthened party's position over the armed forces and the country.

Highlights of the Seventh Party Congress

1. During the Seventh Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea, Kim Jong-un was elected the President of the WPK. As reported by the Korea Central News Agency, "Under his (Kim Jong-un's) guidance the monolithic leadership system of the party has been firmly established throughout the party and society and the single-minded unity of the party and the revolutionary ranks have been consolidated, registering signal successes one after another in all fields including politics, military affairs, economy and culture."³
2. Kim Jong-un, while reviewing the work of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) at its Seventh Congress, unveiled the five year strategy for the state economic development from 2016 to 2020. He called for "state unified guidance and strategic management of the economic work"⁴. He emphasised that "it's necessary to expand and develop external economic relation"⁵ but he did not elaborate how North Korea will achieve the objectives, in the wake of UN sanctions. He also called for a greater focus on factory automation, mechanizing agriculture, and increasing coal output⁶. Other details were not divulged.
3. During the Party Congress, Kim Jong-un stated, "This Congress has unfolded a magnificent blueprint for realizing our people's dreams and ideals by building a powerful socialist country on a full scale under the banner of modelling the whole society on Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism. It has also advanced important tasks to be tackled in achieving independent reunification of the country and accelerating the cause of global independence."⁷
4. During the Party Congress, the delegates decided to "arouse the entire party, the whole country, the entire army and all the people again to the struggle for winning the final victory in the building of a thriving socialist nation as soon as possible and, thus, make them wage a general offensive in the period up to the 8th Congress."⁸ The statement also opens up the possibility of the 8th Party Congress, though it is not clear when that would be held. From these statements it is clear that North Korea will keep a sharp focus on economic development and fight the sanctions imposed by the UN. At the same time, North Korea under Kim Jong-un also seems determined to fight the US-led 'imperialist forces'.
5. The Seventh Party Congress called upon all the service persons and youth 'to launch a *Mallima speed* campaign of rapid progress and innovation for the implementation of its decision in every sector and unit.' Advances in the field of science and technology, especially information technology, nuclear power and military technology, were particularly highlighted during the deliberations.

6. In addition to Kim Jong-un's speech in which he declared that North Korea will keep on making nuclear weapons, the Party Congress also showed firm resolve on the nuclear issue. It was stated, "Let us turn our country into a matchless nuclear power by bolstering up the Juche-based nuclear force in quality and quantity to mercilessly stamp out the enemies challenging us, whether they are in sky or underground or on the sea."⁹
7. Kim Jong-un highlighted the importance of nuclear weapons for North Korea. The Party Congress agreed to make the country's nuclear status 'permanent' and to boost its nuclear arsenal "both in quality and quantity." North Korea is likely to continue to develop more powerful hydrogen-based nuclear bombs.¹⁰ Kim Jong-un added that the weapons would only be used if North Korea was threatened with similar kind of weapons, hinting at the US and South Korea.
8. Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's sister was also given a key post at the Party Congress. According to the reports, she has joined the ruling committee. She is currently holding the post of Vice-Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department.
9. Kim Yong-nam and Hwang Pyong-so were elected as members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of Workers' Party. Highlighting the strength of the Party Congress Kim Jong-un stated, "3467 delegates have the right to vote in this Congress and 200 delegates have the right to address it; all of them are present here as they have been elected at the conferences of the WPK at different levels. Among them 1545 are delegates of Party officials and political workers, 719 delegates of service personnel, 423 delegates of state administrative and economic officials, 52 delegates of officials of working people's organizations, 112 delegates of officials in the sectors of science, education, public health, culture and the arts and the mass media, 786 delegates of hardcore Party members involved in field labour, six anti-Japanese revolutionary war veterans and 24 former unconverted long-term prisoners. Of them 315 are women."
10. During the Seventh Party Congress, Presidium of the Political Bureau was constituted, comprising Kim Jong-un, Kim Yong Nam, Hwang Pyong So, Pak Pong Ju and Choe Ryong Hae.
11. Kim Jong-un will also head the Executive Policy Bureau/Secretariat and Central Military Commission. The only prime position left is that of the Chairmanship of the Control Commission of the Party Central Committee, which is now headed by Chairman Hong In Bom.

Figure 1 gives a clear picture of the composition of the party and the Party Congress.

Figure 1**Structure and organs of the WPC, DPRK**

(Source: Author's compilation, based on the Seventh Party Congress of the WPK, DPRK, available at http://www.ncnk.org/resources/news-items/kim-jong-uns-speeches-and-public-statements-1/KJU_Speeches_7th_Congress.pdf)

Responses from the Major Stakeholders

South Korea

Spokesperson and Deputy Minister for Public Relations, Cho June-hyuck stated, “North Korea repeated its absurd claims that it is a so-called responsible nuclear weapons state and nuclear power of the world, and that its “Byungjin” policy – the simultaneous pursuit of economic and nuclear development – is its lasting strategy. By doing so, North Korea clearly demonstrated its unwillingness to voluntarily abandon its nuclear program.”¹¹ Cho June-hyuck further said that South Korea will never recognise North Korea as a nuclear weapon state and the North Korean policy of “Byungjin” policy is bound to fail.

In the light of the above statements, it is clear that South Korea will carry on with its policy of sanctions and put diplomatic pressure on North Korea to abandon nuclear weapons. According to the reports, a senior South Korean official said that “it was too early to assess whether trade and financial restrictions imposed on Pyongyang in March 2016 are having an effect.”¹² This means that South Korea does not want to push North Korea to the brink through sanctions and would like to keep the possibility of dialogue open.

Park Geun-hye, the South Korean President said that North Korea has “showed no sign of willingness to change but only made “preposterous claims about being a nuclear weapons state.”¹³

China

China closely observed the Seventh Party Congress and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC expected that it would “herald an era of national development and well-being of the people in North Korea.” China also suggested that the North Korean leadership “respond to international community and safeguard the lasting peace and stability of Northeast Asia.”¹⁴

Xi Jinping congratulated Kim Jong-un on his election as Chairman of Workers’ Party of Korea on behalf of Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and in his personal capacity, making him the only head of State to do so.

Xi also hoped that people will achieve new accomplishments in the cause of building socialism under the leadership of the WPK headed by Kim Jong-un. He reiterated that China-DPRK friendship was “personally forged and carefully fostered by the two countries’ leaderships of the older generation” and stated that “China is willing to work with the DPRK to promote the constant development of bilateral relations for the benefit of the two countries and the two peoples, and to make positive contributions to safeguarding peace, stability and development in the region.”¹⁵

Pang Zhongying, Professor at Renmin University, China, is of the view that although, since Kim Jong-un took office, “China-North Korea has seen many ups down in relation, but wording of Xi’s message to Kim indicates that since this party congress, relationship will return to normal.”¹⁶

Chinese media widely covered the event and reported minute details of the Party Congress to the Chinese people. *Global Times* published an opinion on Kim Jong-un's remarks that North Korea as a "responsible nuclear weapons state will strive for world denuclearization and faithfully fulfil obligations of nuclear non-proliferation" and "will not resort to nuclear weapons first" is the new policy of North Korea. The paper opines that Kim's declaration was made from "the perspective that North Korea is now a nuclear state. However, the international community has not yet acknowledged North Korea as a nuclear nation, therefore, the latter's attitude has not changed, and neither has its biggest contradiction with the outside world been resolved."¹⁷ Shi Yinhong, Professor at the School of International Relations, Renmin University, is of same view.¹⁸ Jin Jingyi, Professor, Korean Peninsula Research Centre at Beijing University, while responding to a question that Kim Jong-un has called two Koreas to engage in a dialogue to eliminate misunderstanding and mistrust and asked neighbouring countries to favour unifications, stated that though Kim has not directly named China, but it can play a constructive role to improve both Koreas' relations.¹⁹ China, therefore, made it apparent that it opposes Pyongyang's nuclear development, but fully respects North Korea's autonomy to govern its own country.²⁰

Japan

So far as Japan's reaction is concerned, the initial response from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Japan, has been cautious. Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida in a press release held on May 10, 2016 stated, "We intend to continue gathering and analyzing information while closely collaborating with related countries...However, the Government cannot accept North Korea's clarification of a stance of continuing nuclear and missile developments, failing to adhere to multiple Security Council resolutions, the Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks, and the Pyongyang Declaration by Japan and North Korea, and presentation of one-sided opinions about Japan. We intend to continue pursuing a comprehensive solution to the various outstanding issues by applying the principles of "dialogue and pressure" and "action-for-action" and also working together with related countries."²¹

Earlier, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had also made strong comments during the *Adoption of a Resolution by the United Nations Security Council on the Nuclear Test and the Ballistic Missile Launch conducted by North Korea*. He said, "Japan highly appreciates that the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2270 on 2 March, 2016²² regarding North Korea's nuclear test in January (2016) and ballistic missile in February (2016). With the adoption of this resolution, that encompasses strong content greatly increasing and strengthening sanctions, the international community has demonstrated a resolute stance against North Korea, along with the independent measures taken by Japan and other countries." He added, "Japan strongly urges North Korea to sincerely heed the strong warnings and condemnation repeatedly expressed by the international community and to comply faithfully and fully with Resolution 2270 and the series of relevant resolutions, without taking further provocative actions, such as nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches."²³

In essence, Japan's priorities on the North Korean issue are twofold: first, to make sustained efforts to denuclearise North Korea. Second, deescalate the ongoing crisis.

The US

The nuclear programme of North Korea has been a cause of concern for the US and its allies in the region. After its nuclear and ballistic missile tests in the beginning of 2016, President Barak Obama signed an Executive Order, blocking property (and interest derived from it) of the Government of North Korea and the Workers' Party of Korea, and prohibiting certain transactions with respect to North Korea.²⁴

The Worker's Congress was keenly watched for the announcements on the continuation of North Korea's nuclear weapons program and its trajectory. The Workers' Congress's decision on strengthening the capability of its nuclear weapons formalises North Korea's position. It had already declared itself "a responsible nuclear weapons state" and disavowed the use of nuclear weapons unless its sovereignty is first infringed by others with nuclear arms. It's a major reason why many South Korean and US government officials believe that a fifth nuclear test could be imminent.²⁵ Nonetheless, during the proceedings of the Workers' Congress, Kim Jong-un, stated that he might be willing to normalise its relations with States that are hostile to it. This is being generally understood to be the US and South Korea.

Mark C. Toner, Deputy Spokesperson, US Department of State, in the daily press briefing conducted by the department stated that, "the US is always on heightened alert with regard to North Korea, given its actions over the past weeks and months. It's a highly unpredictable regime. The US will continue to apply the kind of pressure that convinces the regime to refrain from actions and rhetoric that only escalate tensions and destabilize the region." He further added that, "...it's a pretty opaque regime in that regard. I don't know if we're looking for any great outcomes from the congress. We certainly would welcome some kind of sign that they are willing to, as I said, de-escalate, refrain from, as I said, actions that destabilize the region, and really pursue steps that fulfil its obligations, international obligations to denuclearize."²⁶

On being asked if the US was taking additional steps if there are provocations from North Korea, Mr. Toner stated that the UN had passed sanctions in April 2016, which the US was in the process of implementing. He further stated that the US will continue to apply pressure through such means while ensuring that the security of the peninsula remains 'Ironclad'.²⁷ In his remarks at the end of the Trilateral Summit, (the US-Japan-South Korea) held in Washington DC in March 2016, President Obama remarked that, "...trilateral security cooperation is essential to maintaining peace and stability in Northeast Asia, deterring the North Korean nuclear threat and the potential of nuclear proliferation as a consequence of North Korean activities."²⁸ It is interesting to note that during the period of the Workers' Party Congress, James Clapper, Director of US National Intelligence was on a visit to Seoul.

Hundreds of international journalists were invited to cover the Workers' Congress, a surprising development for a nation with a reputation for secrecy. American news channel, Cable News Network (CNN) was allowed to broadcast parts of the event and was allowed access to the Workers' Congress meeting. It may be in a bid to counter the widespread criticism that North Korea faces routinely from the international media as also to show the support that Mr. Kim has

among the people. The parades that followed the Workers' Congress were broadcasted by the international media.

Russia

Russia's position in the region is complicated because of its national interests and its ambition to be recognised as an indispensable player in resolving global challenges, at par with the US.²⁹

The nuclear test that North Korea conducted on January 6, 2016, and its launch of the prohibited ballistic missiles on February 7, 2016³⁰ has led to criticisms from Russia. In a statement on February 7, the Russian Foreign Ministry protested North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missiles programs and has supported the "six-party talks" and denuclearization for a resolution of the on-going conflict in the Korean Peninsula. It stated that Pyongyang ignored the global community's appeals and has again demonstrated provocative actions in disregard of international law. However, its statement also contains advice to North Korea's regime of not becoming a victim to the West, especially the US's strategy. The statement said that "it is obvious that these actions will dramatically increase tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia as a whole *as they play into the hands of those who support the bloc policy and military escalation*,"³¹ as well as cause serious damage to the region's security, mainly to North Korea itself."³²

Since the early 2000s, Russia has grown used to North Korea's provocations.³³ However, the international community's strong unanimous reaction to the DPRK's latest nuclear test and rocket launch and passing of United Nations Security Council Resolution including sanctions this year, led Russia to protest against Pyongyang. However, a tone of balance and appeasement is also present on the Russian side, of not annoying Pyongyang or the international community.

The Russian Foreign Ministry recommended to Pyongyang leaders to consider whether a policy of confrontation with the global community meets the country's interests.³⁴ On the same day, February 7, Russian Foreign Ministry released a commentary on the situation in the Korean Peninsula in the light of the military exercise conducted by the US and South Korea and the reaction to it by North Korea. Russia condemned the military exercise as it made Pyongyang insecure.³⁵ Although Kremlin protested Pyongyang's nuclear threats and tests as illegal, however, to a large extent, Kremlin's statement demonstrates that the nuclear threats posed by Pyongyang is in retaliation to the US and South Korean actions. In the case of Russia, the position of the country needs to be seen from two angles; firstly, as a member of international community and secondly, as an independent player in the Asia-Pacific region.

As a member of the international community, it disapproves of North Korea's actions, and as an independent player in the Asia-Pacific region, its focus is on increasing its economic footprint in the region. Russia wants to extend trade relations with neighbouring Asian countries and attract Asian capital in order to develop the depopulated regions of Eastern Siberia and Russian Far East. Thus, instability on the Korean Peninsula is an obstacle to Russia's efforts to integrate its economy in the region.³⁶

On North Korea, Russia has been trying to maintain a balanced view due to its own national interests. North Korea is important for Russia's 'Pivot to Asia'. Russian businesses would like to get access to North Korean mineral resources. In addition, Russia is implementing long-term infrastructure projects in North Korea. Important projects include the construction of the Hasan-Rajin railway, which connects the Russian Primorye Territory with the North Korean port of Rajin. Other projects include the construction of a gas pipeline and the installation of power lines from Russia to South Korea via North Korea. Although the trade volume between Russia and North Korea is US\$100 million as per the data of 2015,³⁷ but Kremlin wants to strengthen its economic ties with North Korea, especially with Russia's focus on developing the Far East. Just after attending the recent Davos Forum, the Minister for the Development of the Russian Far East, Alexander Galushka was quoted in a January 26, 2016 interview with Russia's state-run TASS news agency that Russia would be increasing its development in the Far East and expanding trade with North Korea.³⁸

The ambition to protect its strategic and economic interests in the region and to project itself as a responsible player of the international community, Russia has been opposed to forceful sanctions against North Korea in regard to the UNSCR. On January 26, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stressed that "absolutely the only way (to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue) is through resuming the six-party talks"³⁹ and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.⁴⁰ He was dismissive of South Korean President Park Geun-hye's proposal of a five-party talks framework excluding North Korea, saying that it was "not a good idea."⁴¹

Implications for India

While the Ministry of External Affairs of India has not come up with any official response on North Korea's Seventh Party Congress, Indian leadership has maintained that dialogue with North Korea has to be continued. It has supported calls by the international community for North Korea to engage with the international community. After the North Korean link to the A. Q. Khan Proliferation network became public, India has been concerned about further proliferation. India's concerns had largely emanated from the Pakistan-North Korea nuclear partnership. In 1999, India had seized a shipment of North Korean missile components en route to Pakistan. The North Korea-Pakistan nuclear relationship, according to some experts, is a dormant yet an unpredictable challenge.

Overall, India's relations with North Korea are cordial but limited in terms of diversity. In April 2015, North Korea's Foreign Minister Ri Su-yong visited India. In September 2015, India nominated Minister of State for Home Kiren Rijiju to attend an official event held at the North Korean Embassy in New Delhi.

So far as the recent nuclear tests are concerned, India's position is clearly presented in the *India - Republic of Korea Joint Statement for Special Strategic Partnership* released on May 18, 2015 during the South Korea visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It states:

“The two leaders underlined the paramount importance of peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. In this regard, they expressed concern over the development of DPRK’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, which is in violation of its international obligations and commitments. They urged the DPRK to fully comply with all of its international obligations, including under the relevant UN Security Council resolutions, and to fulfil its commitments under the 2005 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks. Prime Minister Modi expressed support for President Park’s efforts to build trust in the Korean peninsula and to lay the groundwork for peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula.”⁴²

Conclusion

- The Seventh Party Congress has undoubtedly strengthened Kim Jong-un’s position in the country. By elevating Kim Yo-jong to higher position, he has consolidated his position, as he has got a family member in the party structure, who is likely to remain his key confidant and have an important role to play.
- A more stable and secure North Korea is in the interest of the region and all the major stakeholders including South Korea. The Seventh Congress of the WPK has contributed towards that. The Congress also unveiled five year plan to revive the North Korea’s stagnant economy and pushed for foreign trade and participating in the global economy. However, there are no realistic chances for the North Korean economy to recover.
- So far as the armed forces are concerned, it is likely to remain under the tight control of Kim Jong-un. The sudden disappearance and re-emergence of Ri Yong Gil, formerly chief of the North Korean military’s general staff, indicates that forces more powerful than army do exist in North Korea. Incidentally, Ri Yong Gil was named among members of the Workers’ Party central military commission.
- Apart from strengthening the position of Kim Jong-un, the Party Congress has also indicated that North Korea will not abandon the nuclear programme and projected itself as responsible nuclear power. Nonetheless, North Korea’s dual track policy of development of nuclear weapons and economic progress is unlikely to do much good for the country. Chinese experts are of the view that diplomatic isolation of North Korea depends to a large extent on Seoul and Washington, but with less than a year left in office for President Obama, it is unlikely that US will change its course of direction.
- Russia along with the US must be cautious about their policies towards the Korean Peninsula. Their policies are likely to have a huge impact not only on the two countries involved in the conflict, but also the world, as North Korea has displayed its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities despite sanctions.

- The North Korean nuclear weapons development remains a challenge that is confronting the US and its alliance partners-Japan and South Korea.
- For China, the concern is the increased patrolling of the waters by the US Navy and the possibility of deployment of more US military personnel to military bases in Japan and South Korea. For China, nuclearisation of Northeast Asia is not in its long-term interest.
- The US, South Korea and Japan, unlike Russia and China, are supportive of the UN Sanctions; nonetheless, they are in favour of the dialogue process if it is able to stop North Korea from upgrading its nuclear capabilities and halt its nuclear programme. While the success of the negotiations with Iran has raised expectations that a similar process can be achieved with North Korea, it has to be kept in mind that Iran and North Korea are two different States with distinct socio-political and economic needs.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of authors and do not reflect the views of the Council.

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