



Korean Peninsula Update

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The Ninth WPK Congress: Pyongyang's New Military, Economic, and Succession Blueprint

The latest policy developments in North Korea are altering the long-standing geopolitical framework of the Korean Peninsula. On March 23, Kim Jong Un, leader of North Korea, declared that the country would permanently strengthen its nuclear forces to deter Washington and defined South Korea as its most hostile state in a speech delivered at parliament. These statements continue the strategic direction set at the recent Ninth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), held in Pyongyang from February 19 to 25 – where North Korea proclaimed that it has moved beyond proving its capabilities, instead seeking to enforce a new regional order by shifting from nuclear aspiration to large-scale operability.

According to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), one of North Korea's main state-controlled media, Kim Jong Un used the Ninth Congress to provide a rigorous review of the previous five-year plan established during the Eighth Congress, acknowledging strategic milestones in national defence while identifying areas for economic recalibration. Such assessments served as the foundation for institutionalising the “nuclear trigger system” (*Haekpangasoe*), an integrated command and control structure designed to ensure automated and prompt nuclear responses. By adopting trigger terminology, the regime signalled a shift towards an operationalised arsenal that incorporates pre-emptive strike capabilities as stipulated by national law. Looking ahead, Pyongyang's long-term defence plan for 2026-2030 prioritises high-tech asymmetric assets, including artificial intelligence driven unmanned weapons and satellite neutralisation technologies – such as 600mm and new-type 240mm multiple rocket launchers – which are specifically designated as the primary deterrent against targets within South Korean territory.

Aligned with this nuclear strategy, the Ninth Congress recalibrated the North's external relations. While maintaining strategic ambiguity toward the US – where reengagement is conditional on Washington recognising North Korea as a nuclear state – the regime also cemented its two-Koreas framework. With the Congress officially defining South Korea as the “out-and-out first hostile state” and “immutable principal enemy,” it reinforces the legal termination of eight decades of inter-Korean relations.

Economic policy outlined during the Congress complements this military posture. The 2026-2030 National Economic Development Five-Year Plan focuses on agricultural stability and seeks total self-reliance as a prerequisite for the regime's two-state stance. By setting an ambitious annual grain production target of 9.5 million tonnes and planning the reclamation of 300,000 hectares of tideland, Pyongyang continues its objective to achieve agricultural self-sufficiency and the construction of a siege economy prepared for prolonged international isolation.

Internally, loyalty to the Kim bloodline was reaffirmed through a leadership reshuffle of the WPK. Kim Yo Jong, the powerful sister of Kim Jong Un and the main voice on inter-Korean relations, returned to the Political Bureau as an alternate member and full department director, yet the absence of Kim Jong Un's daughter, Kim Ju Ae, from the official proceedings was notable. As WPK statutes require a minimum age of 18 for party membership, and Kim Ju Ae is currently estimated to be in her early-to-mid teens, her formal political debut within the party framework is likely deferred until the 10th Congress, where she might be granted an official position.

Nevertheless, recent reports from the South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS) suggest she has already reached the level of heir apparent, citing her elevated protocol hierarchy and increasing involvement in state affairs. Such assessments, however, meet with scepticism among analysts who argue her path remains blocked by rigid Neo-Confucian patriarchy and the potential existence of a hidden male heir. In this narrative, her public profile serves as a symbolic placeholder to divert international scrutiny while imprinting the bloodline's legitimacy upon the populace. As the military remains historically unprepared to swear loyalty to a female youth, the Ninth Congress has ultimately solidified a Neo-Cold War structure, with Pyongyang doubling down on strategic partnerships with Moscow and Beijing to navigate a fractured global order.

With Pyongyang consolidating an operational nuclear posture and Washington's attention currently focused on the Middle East, the regime may perceive wider room to deepen these partnerships – possibly its military cooperation with Moscow. As North Korea becomes increasingly linked to the broader security challenges confronting Europe, monitoring these developments remains crucial for Sweden and other European countries.

Tove Jalmerud has contributed to this analysis.

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Woo, E.H. '[South Korea's Foreign Policy After Regime Change: The Rise of Pragmatic Diplomacy](#)'. *UI Brief* No. 1, February 2026.

Hanssen, U., Isaksson, E., & Katzeff Silberstein, B. '[Sweden's path to diplomatic relations with North Korea, 1950-73](#)'. *Cold War History*, 1-22, 2026.



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