



Evaluation of the Recent Changes in Power Elites within North Korea's WPK Leadership: Focusing on the Decisions Made at the 16th Meeting of Political Bureau of the 7th C.C., WPK

Dr. CHEONG Seong-chang

Director,

Center for North Korean Studies

The Sejong Institute

(softpower@sejong.org)

At the 16th meeting of the Political Bureau of the 7th Central Committee (C.C.) of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), which took place on August 13, the North Korean officials determined key personnel affairs and discussed various measures regarding the recovery from the flood damage, the refinement of the anti-epidemic system, the lift of blockade on all front-line areas along the Military Demarcation Line, including Kaesong City, and the establishment of a new department in the party's Central Committee.

The data presented to the meeting described the severity of the damage from the floods: 39,296 hectares of crops were damaged nationwide, especially in Kangwon, North, and South Hwanghae Provinces and Kaesong City; more than 16,680 private home-, and 630 public- buildings flooded or were destroyed; numerous roads, bridges, and railways were cut off; even a dam, used for dam-type power plants, collapsed. Kim Jong Un, chairman of the WPK, however, indicated that North Korea "should shut the border tighter and carry out strict disease control" as the COVID-19 crisis continues throughout the world, and "should not allow any assistance from outside," but pursue self-rehabilitation in the flood-hit area and maintain isolationism.

Organizational and personnel procedures also took place with great importance at this meeting. Kim Tok Hun (vice chairman of the C.C., WPK and chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly Budget Committee) and Ri Pyong Chol (vice chairman of the C.C., WPK and vice chairman of the Central Military Commission of the WPK) were elected as members of the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the C.C., WPK—the party's top policy-making body consisted of three to five members. Also, Kim Tok Hun replaced Kim Jae Ryong as the premier of the DPRK Cabinet, and Kim Jae Ryong was reassigned as a vice chairman and a department director of the C.C., WPK. Park Thae Dok, who was removed from his post (Minister of Agriculture) in February 2020,

was by-elected as a member of the Political Bureau and was also appointed as a vice chairman and a department director of the C.C., WPK. Pak Myong Sun, deputy director of the Light Industry Department of the WPK, and Jon Kwang Ho, vice premier of the DPRK Cabinet, were by-elected as alternate members of the Political Bureau of the C.C., WPK and were also appointed as department directors of the C.C., WPK. Kim Yong Su, the first vice-minister of the Finance and Accounting Department of the WPK, was also promoted to the position of department minister of the C.C., WPK. Most of the personnel, except for Ri Pyong Chol (vice chairman of the Central Military Commission of the WPK), experienced changes in positions or promotions with economic elites at the center.

The personnel affairs in relation to the members of the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the WPK draw attention in particular.

Firstly, Kim Tok Hun (59 years old) was appointed the premier of the DPRK Cabinet and elected as a member of the Presidium of the Political Bureau at the same time—unlike his predecessors Pak Pong Ju (81 years old) and Kim Jae Ryong (61 years old). Pak was elected as a member of the Presidium in 2016—only three years after he started to serve as the premier of the Cabinet. Kim Jae Ryong remained simply as a member of the Political Bureau and could not be a part of the Presidium throughout his time as the premier of the DPRK Cabinet since 2019. That Kim Tok Hun became a member of the Presidium and the premier of the DPRK Cabinet at the same time implies that Kim Jong Un truly trusts Kim Tok Hun. Kim Jae Ryong has been a political elite; he had been the secretary of the WPK Chagang Province Committee until he became the premier of the DPRK Cabinet. Kim Tok Hun, on the other hand, is an economic elite, who had held a managerial position at the Taean Heavy Machine Complex and had been the head of the Chagang Provincial People's Committee. Against this backdrop, Kim Jong Un may have concluded that Kim Tok Hun could be better positioned to be the premier of the DPRK Cabinet.

Secondly, the addition of Kim Tok Hun, the new premier of the DPRK Cabinet, as a member of the Presidium led the Presidium of the Political Bureau to have two economic elites. With Pak Pong Ju, the vice chairman of both the C.C., WPK and the State Affairs Commission, and Kim Tok Hun, the number of economic elites has so far grown to the unprecedented largest number of two. Until this 16th meeting of the Political Bureau of the 7th C.C., WPK, there has been one or none of the economic elite within the Presidium of the Political Bureau. For example, during the 4th Conference of the WPK that was held in April 2012, there were two military elites among five members of the Presidium. However, the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the C.C., WPK that was formed during this meeting on August 13, consists only one military elite, but two economic elites. Such change shows Kim Jong Un's intent to break through the economic crisis by empowering the economic elites and to re-

spond to various difficulties ranging from the international community's sanctions against North Korea, the trade collapse and the shortage of foreign currency caused by the border closure during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to the recent, severe flood damage. Among the two economic elites, Pak Pong Ju is expected to be in charge of key economic sectors in which Kim Jong Un showed his interest by carrying out field inspections; Kim Tok Hun is expected to share Pak's role and cover general economic businesses and other relevant projects. In the past, Kim Jong Un had increased the proportion of economic elites in the leadership positions, especially in the Political Bureau, and had reduced the impact of international sanctions against North Korea that was further tightened after the nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests in 2017.

Thirdly, Ri Pyong Chol, the director of the Munitions Industry Department of the Central Military Commission of the C.C., WPK, was elected as a member of the Presidium over other powerful military authorities. During the early years of Kim Jong Un's reign, both a director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army (KPA) and a chief of the General Staff of the KPA were elected as members of the Presidium. When Ri Yong Ho, the former chief of the General Staff of the KPA, was removed from the Presidium in 2012, a director of the General Political Bureau maintained this position. In other words, the General Political Bureau of the KPA has been considered the most influential figure in the military sector. The fact that the director of the Munitions Industry Department, who oversees the development of strategic weapons such as nuclear weapons and missiles, became a member of the Presidium over the director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA is an unprecedented phenomenon. This was a sequel to another unprecedented event that had happened in May at the meeting of the Central Military Commission of the C.C., WPK, when Ri Pyong Chol, the director of the Munitions Industry Department of the C.C., WPK, was appointed a vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, which is considered the de facto second in command and was usually reserved for a director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA. The appointment of Ri in various key posts suggests that Kim Jong Un is shifting the power of policy-making from the hands of the director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA to those of Director Ri of the Munitions Industry Department in order to prioritize the development and deployment of strategic weapons such as nuclear weapons and missiles for national defense.

According to Global Fire Power, an American institution that evaluates military power of various nations, South Korea ranked sixth and North Korea ranked 25th in the 2020 Military Strength Ranking. Without nuclear weapons, North Korea is far lagging behind in terms of military power; for North Korea must remain in competition against South Korea, it cannot easily give up its nuclear development. Therefore, North Korea is expected to continue its dual approach toward both economic development

and strategic weaponry.

Kim Jong Un is empowering economic and military elites all together to pursue “self-rehabilitation, self-prosperity, and self-nuclear deterrent force” and to fight against international sanctions against North Korea. Therefore, if South Korea and the United States truly want North Korea to denuclearize, they should strategically cooperate with China to better negotiate with North Korea. Otherwise, the South Korean government must find alternative solutions to manage the threat of “nuclear-armed North Korea” and pursue peaceful cooperation with North Korea while maintaining a favorable reception from the general public.♣

※ *Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.*

※ *This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.*