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Evaluation of the 4th Enlarged Meeting of the 7th WPK Central Military Commission of the DPRK: Increase of Nuclear Deterrence and Restructuring of Military Leadership for Managing Strategic Armed Forces

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On May 23, 2020, Kim Jong Un, chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) of North Korea, held the 4th Enlarged Meeting of the 7th WPK Central Military Commission (CMC). At the meeting, he proposed new measures for "further increasing the nuclear war deterrence" and for "putting the strategic armed forces on a high alert operation." Kim additionally laid out crucial policies to "considerably" improve the firepower strike ability of the Korean People's Army (KPA). Furthermore, Kim carried out unprecedented promotion by appointing Ri Pyong Chol, vice-chairman of the WPK Central Committee and director of the WPK Munitions Industry Department, as vice-chairman of the CMC of the WPK, and promoting Pak Jong Chon to vice marshal (placed between marshal and general), a rank higher than Kim Su Gil, director of the KPA General Political Bureau.

In the past, Chairman Kim Jong Un had elected the director of the KPA General Political Bureau (GPB) and the chief of the KPA General Staff as the vice-chairman of the CMC. This time, however, Ri Pyong Chol, director of the WPK Munitions Industry Department, was abruptly elected as the position next to the top at the highest military decision-making organization, which remained empty for a while. In fact, Ri was not even one of three key figures of the KPA – director of the GPB, chief of the General Staff and minister of the People's Armed Forces. His military rank is even colonel general (lieutenant-general of the ROK Armed Forces), which is lower than that of the chief of the General Staff, Pak Jong Chon, director of the GPB, Kim Su Gil and the minister of the People's Armed Forces, Kim Jong Gwan. In short, Chairman Kim's decision to appoint Ri, who led the overall development of nuclear weapons and missiles, to the vice-chairman of the CMC indicates Kim's strong will to significantly increase the "nuclear deterrence" in a short period of time.

Meanwhile, Kim Jong Un promoted Pak Jong Chon, chief of the General Staff of the KPA, to vice marshal. It is a rank higher than Director Kim Su Gil. Since the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, the director of the KPA General Political Bureau, who oversees personnel affairs and political thought affairs of the KPA, has been ranked equivalent to or higher than the chief of the KPA General Staff, who controls overall military operations. This promotion diverges from conventional practice. The director of the GPB is the chief of the WPK Central Military Commission, and this internal organization is not directly supervised by Chairman Kim. And thus, it has been considered natural for the director of the GPB to have the same or higher rank than other leadership positions within the military, such as the chief of General Staff and the minister of the People's Armed Forces.

It seems that Kim Jong Un appointed Pak Jong Chon to vice marshal, a rank higher than the director of GPB, in relevance to new policies for “putting the strategic armed forces on a high alert operation (a state in which changes occur rapidly).” For instance, this vice marshal may determine the use of strategic armed forces such as nuclear weapons and missile, at a rapid pace under Kim’s approval during emergencies as regional or full-scale war.

On May 24, the Rodong Sinmun (the state-run media of North Korea) reported that at the 4th Enlarged Meeting of the 7th CMC of the WPK, “the issue of examining and setting right the unreasonable machinery and compositional defects and the core issues for further increasing the capabilities for militarily deterring the threatening foreign forces by rapidly increasing the self-reliant defense capabilities and organizing new units” were discussed, and “crucial measures for considerably increasing the fire-power strike ability” were taken. Considering such reports, North Korea seems to have taken measures to newly organize or enlarge forces for operating firepower, including nuclear weapons and missiles, or to dissolve or consolidate other military units.

In late December, 2019, North Korea held the 3rd Enlarged Meeting of the 7th CMC of the WPK. It was reported that “important military issues and measures for organizing or expanding and reorganizing new units in conformity with the Party’s military and strategic intention, changing the affiliation of some units and changing deployment of units” were discussed and decided. This year, however, Chairman Kim directly signed seven orders on newly decided military plans. It indicates that the reorganization of North Korea’s armed force and its command system has been more specified.

Losing hopes for the U.S.-DPRK negotiation and the increase of armament of South Korea in preparation for the transfer of Wartime Operation Control could have caused North Korea to reinforce its nuclear power strategy and execute major restructuring of its armed forces and command system. Currently the world is in great turmoil with COVID-19, and especially the U.S., as the most affected state by the calamity, is unable to focus on the North Korean issue. Such circumstance seems as a great opportunity

for North Korea to enhance its nuclear and missile capabilities at speed. In addition, North Korea may be in need to effectively respond to South Korea's military reinforcement, which is acquiring stealth aircraft and high-tech weapons for the transfer of Wartime Operation Control.

As such, North Korea is strengthening its position of a nuclear power and, at the same time, is moving toward in preparing of "nuclear war" by carrying out great changes in the existing military policy-making and command system with the director of the GPB at the highest position. Regarding this situation, there is an urgent need for a "grand strategy" for South Korean government, which enables not only disease prevention, individual tours and humanitarian assistance but mostly North Korea to come out to the denuclearization negotiation talks. Strategic cooperation with the U.S. and other neighboring states - China, Russia, Japan - is crucial.

Unfortunately, international cooperation for denuclearization of North Korea is difficult to expect due to the pandemic of COVID-19 and a new cold war between the U.S. and China. Therefore, the South Korean government needs intense discussions for social consensus on how to pursue realistic security strategies and South-North cooperation with North Korea as a nuclear power. ♦

* 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.