



North Korea's Declaration of "80-Day Campaign" and Its Implications

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Limitations of Overcoming Triple Distress

North Korea has been facing three challenges in 2020. The first challenge is COVID-19 from China that swept the entire globe; the second is the international community's severe economic sanctions; the third is the typhoon damage that occurred in late summer and autumn of 2020. The challenge that is causing the most economic difficulty is COVID-19. As North Korea closed its border in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, it had to pause the trade of goods and social exchanges with China. There are reports that say how the Russian Embassy in North Korea could not replace its staff due to the border closure. North Korean enterprises at the core of North Korea's planned economy are suffering due to a lack of raw materials and the suspension of sales. The North Korean market, which is one of the North Korean economy's pillars of growth, has shrunk due to a shortage of supplies and a sharp decline in the purchasing power of North Korean residents.

The strategies of taking the bull by the horns, localization, and self-reliance for North Korea's economic growth all lost their power. The North Korean officials admitted shortcomings of their economic plan, saying that "goals for improving the national economy have been seriously delayed and the people's living standard not been improved remarkably" at the 6th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) on August 19. It also seems impossible to carry out the plan to overcome the typhoon damage by October. In fact, North Korea must secure basic capital, energy, and food in order to first recover its essential amount of production.

An 80-day Campaign

North Korea has conventionally solved its economic difficulties by speedily mobilizing mass labor. Such speed methods aim to achieve maximum results in a short period of time as if in revolutionary thinking. The basis of the so-called 70-day battle and 100-day battle lies in a strong will to achieve self-reliance. Whenever the country faced major national anniversaries or economic difficulties, it has relied on speedy projects. Since implementing the 100-day campaign in order to encourage the six-year plan for economic development in 1971, North Korea has carried out several speedy projects.

In light of the current economic difficulty, North Korea declared to embark on an “80-day Campaign” at the 19th meeting of the WPK Central Committee Political Bureau on October 5. It is highly unlikely to actually see the North Korean economy recover simply after the short campaign. In fact, North Korea rarely saw successful results through their speedy projects. Nonetheless, there will be great pressure on North Korean residents that may engender certain effects.

Faith in the Military

It is important to note that Ri Pyong Chol, vice-chairman of the Party Central Committee, and Pak Jong Chon, chief of the Korean People’s Army General Staff, were given the title of a marshal at the 19th meeting. North Korea is utilizing the military as its best alternative plan to overcome economic difficulties. In fact, North Korea has often highlighted its military status and relied on the military almost always, with some exaggeration, when it went through economic difficulties. Even for national construction projects, troops were deployed to complete them. On capitalistic point of view, the North Korean policy of utilizing the military in order to overcome economic difficulties seems inefficient in terms of its opportunity cost and trade-off. In case of North Korea, however, the military is considered the most efficiently trained group within the state as North Korea has long run itself based on the military-first policy. In other words, North Korea may be focusing less on its national security, but it is choosing its best policy. Otherwise, it could be said that North Korean officials are focusing on mental armament in order to avoid their economic policies backfiring against themselves.

From our perspective, North Korea must actively adapt reform and open policy, encourage autonomous businesses, revitalize the market, and implement other reform policies in order to overcome economic difficulties. However, it is highly unlikely that North Korea will even consider a policy that could even slightly undermine the authority of its supreme leader. With the best alternative plan, rather, North Korea seems

content by making the most of its military and issuing national mobilization order based on the principle of self-reliance. Therefore, civilians also participate in speedy projects, yet rarely get noticed. This incomprehensible phenomenon in North Korea stems from the nature of the North Korean regime that has maintained hereditary succession in its isolation. Unless there are fundamental changes in North Korean policy, the North Korean economy will continue to face difficulties for a considerable period of time. ❖

※ *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.*