

# Issue Brief

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North Korea's AI Discourse  
Elevated to the National Strategic Level:  
Findings from an Analysis of *Rodong Sinmun*

North Korea AI Research Task Force

## Abstract

In the wake of the 9th Congress of the Workers' Party, North Korea has begun framing artificial intelligence (AI) not merely as a technological issue, but as a key variable for redesigning its overall national strategy. AI-related coverage in *Rodong Sinmun* provides important clues to the strategic pathways North Korea is exploring. North Korean media repeatedly cite the intensifying global AI competition and, in particular, Russia's state-led AI strategy as a case study, redefining AI as an essential task linked to national sovereignty, military innovation, and regime survival. This reporting trend can be interpreted as a legitimization process that repositions AI not as an optional policy tool, but as a national imperative whose neglect could result in unmanageable strategic disadvantages. Notably, Kim Jong Un's on-site guidance related to national defense demonstrate that AI has already entered the stage of actual use and operational deployment in the defense sector, receiving policy priority as a core task of military modernization. This suggests that North Korea's AI strategy, which is taking shape first in the military domain, has the potential to be generalized and extended across the broader national strategy going forward.

### Keywords

North Korea, AI discourse, national AI strategy, 9th Workers' Party Congress, "Third Revolution," defense AI operationalization

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## Intensified Global AI Competition and North Korea's Shifting Problem Perception

Since the mid-2020s, artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer perceived as a technology issue confined to specific countries or industries but as a critical variable determining national competitiveness, security, and overall economic management. Major countries are positioning AI not merely as a target for industrial development, but as a core pillar of national strategy, strengthening their investments accordingly. This trend is evident not only in technology-leading nations but also in countries operating under sanctions and resource constraints.

The recent increase in AI-related coverage in North Korean media can be interpreted as one indication of the authorities' shifting problem perception in response to this changing international environment. *Rodong Sinmun* provided limited coverage of foreign AI developments until 2023, but from 2024 onward, it has repeatedly cited statements by foreign heads of state and, in particular, Russian policy examples, intensively highlighting the nature and significance of AI competition.<sup>1)</sup>

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1) *Rodong Sinmun*, December 24, 2023; April 7, 2024; April 14, 2024; April 21, 2024; April 28, 2024; September 1, 2024; December 15, 2024; January 8, 2025; January 12, 2025; January 28, 2025; February 23, 2025; August 16, 2025; November 2, 2025; November 23, 2025; January 9, 2026; January 18, 2026; January 22, 2026. (Based on a total of 17 foreign AI-related articles, author's count)

This shift in reporting approach suggests that North Korea has begun perceiving AI not simply as a target for technological catch-up, but as a strategic variable that could become a regime-level risk factor if left unaddressed. North Korean media explain the international competition surrounding AI using expressions such as national sovereignty, technology monopoly, military innovation, and irrecoverable losses, repositioning AI not as an optional policy tool but as an unavoidable national task.

At the same time, this changing perception is articulated through both optimistic discourse—"if we do AI well, we can grow"—and crisis discourse, warning that falling behind could result in irrecoverable losses. This dual messaging presents AI as a potential driver capable of leading national development while emphasizing that failure to respond amid shifts in the international order could result in unmanageable strategic disadvantages.

### **The Accumulation of AI Legitimization Discourse**

The most notable feature of North Korean media coverage of foreign AI cases is its emphasis not on technical specifications or performance competition, but on national significance and strategic spillover effects. Articles in *Rodong Sinmun* citing statements by Russian and Iranian leaders define AI as a matter directly tied to national rise and decline, repeatedly emphasizing that lagging behind could result in irrecoverable losses. In this process, AI is presented not as a matter of industrial competitiveness, but as a structural task that the state cannot avoid addressing amid an evolving international order.

Such coverage provides an indirect yet powerful answer to the domestic question of "why must we pursue AI?" In other words, AI is being reconstructed as a core strategic asset capable of

simultaneously securing national survival and development amid changes in the international environment, going beyond merely serving as a means for economic growth. This can be understood as a legitimization process aimed at gaining prior acceptance of the necessity and justification for a national AI strategy, setting aside debates over technical achievements or feasibility.

Particularly significant is that from December 2024 onward, AI coverage began to be explicitly linked with military innovation, nationalization, and state-led models, moving beyond simple technology introduction.<sup>2)</sup> From this point, AI is no longer portrayed simply as "advanced technology" but as a strategic asset for which the state must assume direct responsibility. This indicates that North Korea is not treating AI as an isolated technology policy issue, but is progressively integrating it into its overall national strategy.

Furthermore, this accumulation of legitimization discourse serves to preemptively justify the burdens of resource allocation, priority-setting, and social mobilization that will likely accompany the institutionalization of AI policy. In other words, AI discourse in North Korea is not merely a reflection of changed perceptions; it is part of a broader process of constructing the political and discursive conditions necessary for a transition in national strategy.

The North Korean authorities are highly likely to position AI as a national task given even greater emphasis than the information technology strategy of the 2000s through the 9th Workers' Party Congress. This is because AI is a technology conducive to being expanded into society-wide mobilization discourse, being promoted as an "omnipotent treasured sword" encompassing

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2) "Russian President Comments on AI Development Issues," Rodong Sinmun, December 14, 2024.

military, economic, and cultural domains, with scientists placed at the forefront. In this context, AI is likely to function as a core instrument of regime narrative that presents a new atmosphere and hope for the future, rather than actual results.

### **Emphasis on Inevitability Through Military Discourse**

North Korean media have cited external assessments characterizing AI as the "Third Revolution" in the military domain, following gunpowder and nuclear weapons.<sup>3)</sup> This reflects a perception of AI as an epochal turning point that fundamentally transforms modes of warfare and the entire military technology system. Such a perception is closely connected to current changes in the battlefield environment, particularly the growing importance of drones, electronic warfare, and information dominance in recent conflicts.

A noteworthy aspect is that North Korea presents this military AI discourse primarily by citing external assessments rather than through explicit domestic declarations. This approach helps disseminate the perception that the introduction of intelligence-based weapon systems is not a selective military innovation, but an unavoidable task that must be addressed in light of changes in modern warfare. As cases increase in which drones and intelligence-based weapons shape battlefield outcomes, AI is being re-recognized not as a mere future technology but as a current force element.

This military AI discourse serves to retroactively legitimize and expand the significance of Kim Jong Un's line of military modernization centered on drones and artificial intelligence. Between 2024 and 2025, Kim Jong Un inspected facilities,

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3) "Intensifying Global Competition in AI Development," Rodong Sinmun, January 9, 2026.

including the Drone Institute of the Academy of Defense Sciences and the Unmanned Aeronautical Technology Complex, presenting the incorporation of AI technology into drones and their operational deployment, as well as the advancement of AI in unmanned equipment systems, as core tasks of military modernization.<sup>4)</sup> This indicates that problem perceptions derived from changing patterns of modern warfare and actual combat experience are being directly translated into policy priorities.

Kim's statements and the operationalization of drones demonstrate that in the defense sector, AI is being pursued simultaneously through concrete policies and projects, not merely discursive commitments. This can be regarded as an important indication that AI has already secured policy priority and implementation pathways in the military domain, allowing us to assess the possibility that North Korea's AI strategy will expand from national defense into the broader national strategy in the future.

### **Positioning to National Strategic Level: The Russian-Style State AI Model and Domestic Implementation Hubs**

*Rodong Sinmun's* coverage of Russia's national AI adoption published in January 2026 clarifies the evolving nature of North Korean media reporting on AI. The article provides a relatively detailed introduction to how Russia is designing and implementing AI as a national strategy. It presents as key elements the establishment of a presidential AI Development Committee, the adoption of national AI plans, priority deployment of generative AI in the public administrative sector, reduction of administrative barriers, long-term talent cultivation, and the linkage of AI exports with diplomatic strategy.<sup>5)</sup> This depicts a state-led model that treats AI not as an individual technology policy, but as a

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4) *Rodong Sinmun*, August 26, 2024; March 26, 2025; September 19, 2025; October 2, 2025.

5) "Russia's Efforts for Stable Economic Development," *Rodong Sinmun*, January 22, 2026.

component of national operational infrastructure.

The key point lies in the fact that the article presents an operational model for how the state designs, manages, and mobilizes AI, moving beyond the general argument that "AI is important." This suggests that when North Korea nationalizes its AI strategy, it is likely to pursue a pathway combining centralized management systems with state-led demand-creation mechanisms.

This national-strategy-level vision of AI is being materialized in the form of domestic implementation hubs centered on the Artificial Intelligence Technology Research Institute under the Faculty of Artificial Intelligence at Kim Il Sung University. The institute presents generative AI technology development as its mission and is described as a "development-and-creation-oriented enterprise leading national AI technology advancement."<sup>6)</sup> This shows that AI discourse is moving from the level of research and education to the stage of concrete policy implementation.

In particular, a contribution by the dean of the Faculty of Artificial Intelligence functions to expand this strategy into a society-wide task. The article emphasizes that many countries regard AI as a future core technology determining national rise and fall, and are formulating development strategies, investing resources, and expanding AI's role across industries. It also calls on all sectors and units to actively apply AI in their respective fields to bring about a "new transformation."<sup>7)</sup> Through this, a national development strategy centered on AI is being converted into a society-wide agenda, legitimizing broad-based participation and responsibility. This trend demonstrates that North Korea's AI

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6) "Theory and Practice Well Combined in Talent Cultivation: At the Artificial Intelligence Technology Research Institute under the Faculty of Artificial Intelligence at Kim Il Sung University," Rodong Sinmun, January 5, 2026.

7) "Development Trends in AI Technology," Rodong Sinmun, January 18, 2026.

strategy is not confined to the military domain, but is unfolding along a trajectory of generalization to the overall national strategy.

## **Implications**

Recent AI discourse in *Rodong Sinmun* goes beyond routine technology reporting and points to the possibility of change at the level of national strategy. The newspaper is repositioning AI not as a narrow matter of technological development, but as a strategic variable directly linked to national sovereignty. This represents a discursive transition that elevates AI from an individual policy task to an issue that requires a reconfiguration of the broader national strategy.

This discursive shift is likely to evolve into a problem-definition and legitimization process for elevating AI to a core agenda item in national strategy at the upcoming 9th Party Congress. When this evolution is considered together with the citations of Russia's state-led AI model, it appears highly likely that North Korea will pursue an institutionalization pathway—such as establishing AI-related authorities directly under the central state apparatus and formulating national AI plans—using the 9th Party Congress as a key political juncture.

***The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of INSS.***