

# Issue Brief

Vol.142, No.4, 2026

---

Assessment of the 13th Plenary Meeting of  
the 8th WPK Central Committee

In-Tae Kim  
(tae@inss.re.kr)

## Abstract

North Korea convened the 13th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea from December 9 to 11, over a three-day period. The meeting addressed five agenda items: a review of Party and state policy implementation; a review of the work of the Party Central Auditing Commission; key issues related to preparations for the 9th Party Congress; deliberation on the execution of the 2025 state budget and the 2026 state budget; and organizational matters. In his concluding remarks, Kim Jong Un characterized the overall performance in 2025 as an "accelerated pace of advance, redoubled self-generating power," and asserted that the current "five-year plan has been completed." In effect, he preemptively declared the "comprehensive completion" of the five-year plan, the core task set at the 8th Party Congress. On this basis, the plenary meeting allows for preliminary inferences about the goals and implementation methods of the "second five-year plan" of the Kim Jong Un era. The meeting stressed that all sectors should "accurately establish the goals of the next five-year plan for qualitative development and submit scientific and realistic methods for their realization." In other words, the next five-year plan is being conceived as a "stage of qualitative development" for the "comprehensive development of socialism." While the 8th Central Committee's five-year plan concentrated on "strengthening the economic foundation" by "concentrating capabilities on the central link of economic development, revitalizing the people's economy, and establishing the foundation for improving people's living standards," the next plan is framed as a more realistic stage aimed at accelerating the comprehensive development of socialism through the qualitative upgrading of the overall economy on the basis of that foundation. Moreover, the traditional policy keynote of adhering to self-reliance and self-support—captured in slogans such as "self-reliance and self-strengthening" and "self-powered prosperity and self-powered flourishing"—is expected to continue. In addition, the economic development strategy of the 9th Party Congress is likely to place the "People-First Principle," the governing ideology and practical discourse of the Kim Jong Un regime, at its core, focusing efforts in the aforementioned direction.

### Keywords

8th Central Committee Plenary Meeting, five-year plan, 9th Party Congress, self-reliance, People-First Principle

# Assessment of the 13th Plenary Meeting of the 8th WPK Central Committee

In-Tae Kim

North Korea held the 13th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Worker’s Party of Korea from December 9 to 11, over a three-day period. The meeting addressed five agenda items: a review of Party and state policy implementation, a review of the work of the Party Central Auditing Commission, key issues related to preparations for the 9th Party Congress, discussion of the execution of the 2025 state budget and 2026 state budget, and organizational matters.

Departing from its earlier practice of providing relatively detailed reports on Party plenary meetings, North Korea has, since 2024, released only general and basic information. This plenary session was likewise reported in summary form, focusing on key elements such as the agenda items and Kim Jong Un’s concluding remarks. On the basis of the material made public, this issue brief evaluates the plenary meeting and anticipates the likely direction of the 9th Party Congress.

## The Final Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee

The leadership organs of the 8th Central Committee carried out roughly five years of official activity after being constituted at the 1st Plenary Meeting held immediately following the 8th Party Congress in January 2021. Under the Party bylaws, the plenary meeting—stipulated to be “convened at least once a year”—functions as a “plenary consultative body,” serving as the Central

Committee's decision-making organ that "organizes and guides all Party work between Party Congresses." Over the past five years, plenary meetings have been convened about twice a year, addressing core pending issues in state administration, including the implementation status of Party and state policies in each period. The 8th Central Committee plenary meetings were oriented toward implementing the decisions of the 8th Party Congress, with the five-year plan at the center. In practice, they have operated as the principal organ and implementing body for policy promotion within the governance system centered on Kim Jong Un and the Workers' Party of Korea.

By the numbers, the frequency has been markedly higher than in the previous term: whereas only six plenary meetings were held during the 7th Central Committee following the first Party Congress of the Kim Jong Un era in 2016, the 8th term has held 13 sessions since 2021, at an average interval of 4.6 months, suggesting a trend toward greater regularization. The official "discussion agenda items" presented at these meetings also increased about fivefold, from 14 items in the 7th term to 68 in the 8th term. From the perspective of the regularization and institutionalization of the Central Committee's leadership organs, the 8th term appears broadly comparable to the governance style of the Kim Il Sung era from the 1960s to the 1980s. At the same time, in the operation of policy decision-making structures, the concentration and consolidation of the monolithic leadership system have become even more pronounced.

In contrast to earlier annual review-type plenary meetings, which typically lasted five to six days, the 13th plenum was limited to about three days. It confined itself to reviewing only key aspects, such as "achievements and deviations" of 2025, while placing primary emphasis on preparations for the 9th Party Congress and on subsequent major events, including welcome ceremonies for

returning overseas deployment units and completion ceremonies for flagship construction projects. Notably, this plenum omitted the customary adoption of a “Party decision” outlining major policy tasks for the coming year. Under Party procedures, the policy tasks for 2026 are to be decided by the 9th Central Committee to be formed at the 9th Party Congress. Instead, Kim Jong Un repeatedly called for “the successful conclusion of the work of the 8th Central Committee and the significant role and exertion of the Party central leadership organs” in the period leading up to the 9th Party Congress.

### **Overall Assessment of 2025: “Fulfillment of Annual Economic Goals and Completion of the Five-Year Plan”**

In his concluding remarks, Kim Jong Un summed up performance in 2025 as an “accelerated pace of advance, redoubled self-generating power,” and asserted that the “five-year plan has been completed.” In effect, he declared in advance the “comprehensive completion” of the five-year plan, which had been set as the central task of the 8th Party Congress. He also described 2025 as “a historic year of transition that charged the momentum for vigorously transitioning to a new stage.” As major achievements, he pointed to the fact that “the major industrial sectors of the people’s economy responsibly fulfilled elevated production plans, the agricultural sector recorded higher grain yields than last year, and by splendidly completing construction of major projects, this year’s economic development goals along with the five-year plan have been completed.” Sectoral achievements highlighted included: modernization of key basic industries; progress in regional development policy; the strengthening of national defense capabilities and results in overseas military operations; the 80th Party founding anniversary celebrations; and advances and enhanced national prestige in the sports sector. Of particular note, overseas deployment was officially mentioned for

the first time in a Party plenary context, with the assertion that “by deploying to overseas military operations and demonstrating our military’s and nation’s reputation far and wide through brilliant military achievements,” new accomplishments had been made. Immediately after the plenary meeting, a large-scale welcome ceremony was organized for the return of the Korean People’s Army engineering units dispatched in August, attended by senior Party, government, and military officials including the Central Committee leadership, and this was given extensive media coverage.

Although detailed sector-by-sector accounts of 2025 achievements and shortcomings were not made public, some assessment is possible through the plenary reports and recent propaganda trends. North Korea stated that the overarching goal for 2025 was to “substantially advance the preparatory process for entering the next stage of development while successfully completing the five-year plan,” focusing efforts on “the celebration of the 80th founding anniversary of the Party and preparations for the 9th Party Congress.” From the outset of 2025, emphasis was placed on priority tasks such as the groundbreaking ceremony for 20 cities and counties designated in the second year of the “Regional Development 20×10 Policy.” Compared to previous years, Kim Jong Un relied more on “on-site guidance” than on “policy guidance” through Party meetings, frequently inspecting livelihood-related facilities such as local factories, hospitals, and fishery stations. Unlike the “70-day campaign” before the 7th Party Congress and the “80-day campaign” ahead of the 8th Party Congress—customary “total mobilization” drives in Party Congress seasons—no analogous campaign was organized. Nevertheless, the focus on economic tasks and the intensity of propaganda from the beginning of 2025 through the October celebrations of the 80th Party founding anniversary proceeded in an atmosphere and at a level that surpassed past mobilization efforts.

It appears that visible achievements were secured by concentrating resources on the economic sector and on major policy tasks, commensurate with the final year of the five-year plan and the run-up to the Party Congress. Although “construction delays” for certain priority projects have been acknowledged, the completion of projects at various levels has continued through the end of 2025, including rural modernization, regional industrial development, and central pilot projects. Agricultural conditions also seem to be maintaining a basic growth trajectory. State media and Kim Jong Un’s concluding remarks repeatedly underscored advances in agricultural production, citing claims that “grain output increased by hundreds of thousands of tons nationwide compared to the previous year in 2024” (KCNA, December 6, 2025) and that “this year (2025) recorded higher grain yields than last year (2024).”

The plenary meeting also addressed preparations for the 9th Party Congress. In line with standard congress procedures, the following steps were mentioned: formation of a Congress Preparatory Committee; organization of subcommittees and sectoral working groups; drafting of revised Party bylaws; review of work by Party leadership organs at all levels; and procedures for nominating representatives to higher-level Party conferences and to the Congress itself. However, relative to the timeline and procedures for convening the 8th Party Congress in 2021, there are indications of some delays and differences in approach. The trend toward revising detailed regulations and experimenting with new modes of operation in the Party leadership organs that has emerged under Kim Jong Un is likely to be further consolidated and clarified through the 9th Party Congress.

In his concluding remarks, Kim Jong Un also referred to “shortcomings and malpractices that must be corrected” in order to achieve the qualitative development of socialist construction.

The emphasis was placed on “evaluation of this year’s work by the Secretariat and state leadership organs and analysis of factors creating obstacles” and on “stern criticism of the erroneous ideological viewpoints and irresponsible work attitudes of some leading cadres and responsible officials.” In fact, alongside the series of achievements highlighted in 2025, several unusual shortcomings and deviations were revealed. Early in the year, a regional Party committee (Onchon County) under the Secretariat’s jurisdiction was dissolved as punishment for “collective misconduct,” and the administrative organs of Usi County were also collectively sanctioned for abuse of power.<sup>1)</sup>

In May, numerous officials, including a deputy department director of the Central Party, were subjected to legal and administrative penalties following an accident at the launching ceremony of the destroyer “Kang Kon.” Various problems and deviations were also disclosed in the promotion of several priority projects, such as the Pyongyang General Hospital, regional hospitals, and local industrial factories. The six individuals recalled under organizational matters at the plenary meeting appear to be part of a broader process of “settling Party positions” for officials who had already been disciplined.

## **“Early Reference” to Economic Policies and Priority Tasks for the 9th Party Congress**

### *Policy Tasks for 2026 Emphasized at the Plenary Meeting*

In addition to ongoing policy tasks, new priorities aimed at addressing the “urban–rural gap” were introduced. In the agricultural sector, the “transformation of backward units” such as West Coast tideland farms was described as a “revolutionary

---

1) "Report on the 30th Enlarged Meeting of the Secretariat of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea," Rodong Sinmun, January 29, 2025.

measure,” while in the industrial sector, the transformation of coal-mining villages was “specially emphasized.” Alongside thorough preparations for the next farming season, the plenary reiterated core tasks of the Rural Development Program, including the expansion of wheat cultivation and wheat processing capacity, and the reform of the distribution system in line with socialist distribution principles. The need to expand transformative achievements across regions under the principle of “self-strengthening” was also stressed.

A notable development is the expectation that the construction sector will remain a central policy focus. Construction policy—the core economic policy during the current five-year plan—has mobilized virtually all available national capabilities, with its scope and targets steadily widening. Immediately after the 8th Party Congress, large-scale and standardized construction projects were rolled out, beginning with the plan to build 50,000 housing units in Pyongyang and extending to the Rural Development Program and rural modernization, regional development policy and local industrial factories (the so-called three major construction targets),<sup>2)</sup> healthcare modernization and regional hospitals, and greenhouse farms. The transformation of West Coast tideland farms and coal-mining villages, as directed at this plenary meeting, essentially falls within the same construction policy framework. The meeting also designated 20 cities and counties as targets for the third year of the regional development policy. Construction tasks are therefore expected to place an even heavier burden on the 2026 economic policy, and, alongside particular achievements, various problems such as shortages of funding and labor are also likely to persist.

---

2) At the 11th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee held in December 2024, in addition to regional factory construction for the "Regional Development 20×10 Policy" already being promoted, advanced healthcare facilities, science education and cultural life facilities, and grain management facilities were additionally presented as "three major construction targets."

*Direction of the 9th Party Congress Economic Policy as Indicated in the Plenum Conclusions*

First, there is the issue of the goals and implementation methods of the “second five-year plan” of the Kim Jong Un era. The meeting called on all sectors to “accurately establish the goals of the next five-year plan for qualitative development and submit scientific and realistic methods for their realization.” In other words, the forthcoming five-year plan is being framed as a “stage of qualitative development” aimed at the “comprehensive development of socialism.” While the 8th Central Committee’s five-year plan concentrated on “strengthening the economic foundation” by “concentrating capabilities on the central link of economic development, revitalizing the entire people’s economy, and establishing the foundation for improving people’s living standards,” the next plan is intended to serve as a realistic stage for accelerating the comprehensive development of socialism through the qualitative upgrading of the overall economy. In line with this framing, the “successful completion” of the 8th Central Committee’s five-year plan is repeatedly portrayed as having laid the economic foundation necessary to implement the 9th Central Committee’s five-year plan.

Second, attention must be paid to the policy keynote that is typically presented as the basic principle of the “new five-year plan for national economic development.” This keynote functions as a kind of “political keyword” that permeates the broader policy orientation of the system alongside economic strategy. The “basic seed and subject” of the 2021 five-year plan was declared to be “self-reliance and self-sufficiency,” and this has served as a guiding principle for economic policy over the last five years. Judging from the content of the plenary and more recent policy trends, the next five-year plan does not appear to represent a departure in this regard. The traditional keynote of adherence to

self-reliance and self-support—embodied in slogans such as “self-reliance and self-strengthening” and “self-powered prosperity and self-powered flourishing”—is expected to continue. In addition, the main thrust of economic development at the 9th Party Congress is expected to be anchored in the “People-First Principle,” the ruling ideology and practical discourse of the Kim Jong Un regime, with policy efforts focused accordingly.

## **Conclusion**

The Party Congress, ordinarily held on a five-year cycle, constitutes a critical “political season” within North Korea’s monolithic system. As the regime marks 15 years since Kim Jong Un’s rise to power, North Korea now approaches the ninth Congress in the 80-year history of the Workers’ Party and the third Congress under Kim’s leadership. Through this Congress, the regime is expected to consolidate its governance system around a fully institutionalized Supreme Leader consistent with North Korea’s traditional Party–state structure, while seeking to redefine its national development status and objectives: economically, the advanced development of socialism; militarily, the status of a nuclear-centered military power; and externally, the consolidation of a normalized “strong nation status.” At the same time, the concept of “two hostile states” will likely be more clearly reflected in the Party bylaws and constitution. North Korea is poised to treat 2026—organized around the 9th Party Congress—as a pivotal political juncture for further strengthening the Kim Jong Un regime.

- ◆ The 8th WPK Central Committee (2021-2025) Plenary Meetings by the Numbers
  - Plenary meeting composition: 8th Central Committee leadership organs, 250 members (139 full members, 111 alternate members)
    - Observers: Party and government leadership organs, regional Party and administrative officials, ministry and central agency officials, military commanders, etc.
  - Number of meetings held: 13 plenary meetings in total (average interval of 4.6 months)
    - Regularization of the policy system, including reviews of Party and state policy implementation and discussion of period-specific pending issues
  - Agenda items presented: 68 items during 13 plenary meetings (official results / 14 items during the 7th Central Committee)
    - Regular agenda items: review of Party and state policy, review of Party leadership organs, review and examination of state budget
    - Major decisions: emergency anti-epidemic policy, Rural Development Program, Five Major Party Construction Lines, and education policy
  - Organizational matters (personnel): 356 personnel decisions (official results, mainly appointments)<sup>3)</sup>
    - Following the formation of 250 Party central leadership organ members at the 1st plenary meeting, a total of 356 personnel decisions were made from the 2nd to the 13th meetings
  - Meeting venues: Central Committee conference room (Pyongyang, Mt. Myohyang)
    - June sessions were held mainly at Mt. Myohyang; December sessions were held mainly in Pyongyang

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

---

3) The organizational matters (personnel) at Party plenary meetings announce mainly appointees (by-elections) while handling recalled (dismissed, etc.) individuals confidentially.