

# North Korea's October 10 Parade

[blog.keia.org/2020/10/north-koreas-october-10-parade/](https://blog.keia.org/2020/10/north-koreas-october-10-parade/)

October 13, 2020



**By Stephan Haggard**

If you read the media coverage of North Korea's "military parade," you would be justified in thinking it was just that. However, the event marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Korean Workers Party, not the Korean People's Army. Indeed, the highly choreographed display is designed to show that the military is subordinate to the leadership and the party, not the other way around. Most of the expert analysis has rightly focused on the new weapons on display, and I touch on that issue too. But Kim Jong Un's speech had some things to say about the ongoing shocks hitting North Korea, COVID, nuclear doctrine and even Kim Jong-un's new populist ruling style and theatrical inclinations.

## L'état, c'est moi

A core feature of "democratic centralism"—Lenin's infamous oxymoron—is that the party embodies the general will of the people. What need for elections and the other trappings of democratic rule if the party sees clearly the true interests of the nation? Kim Jong-un notes how the party represents the people and they respond in kind, achieving a seamless fusion of interests:

“No one can think about even a moment of our Party's glorious 75-year history without our great people, an omnipotent creator of history. They have always provided it with wisdom and resourcefulness as a wise mentor, infused it with inexhaustible strength and courage, defended it at the cost of their lives, supported it sincerely and turned its plans and lines into reality.”

North Korea, however, is a personalist regime and in Kim's speech he used populist appeals that bear a family resemblance to those of autocrats elsewhere. The title of Nadia Urbanati's great book on populism captures the idea well: *Me The People*. Kim Jong-un tears up in talking about the great trust the people have placed in him personally, and even apologizes openly for his shortcomings with respect to the economy; this could signal a new focus on economic issues at the upcoming party congress. But the apology proves only a feint, for the more the people have suffered the more it shows their devotion and the more it provides the strength for the autocrat to continue being autocratic:

“Even if it may mean suffering more, our people’s trust in me and our Party is always absolute and steadfast...As I enjoy this greatest trust which no one in this world can ever expect, I have been able to confront without hesitation all manner of challenges remembering the mission and will to make selfless, devoted efforts for the good of the people, jump into do-or-die battles, which would lead even to a war, and uncompromisingly cope with the disasters unprecedented in history.”

We would not have seen this kind of approach—let alone the open emotionalism—from Kim Jong-il; a new populist governing style is clearly at work.

### **The Crisis Continues**

That said, times remain hard and getting out in front of that fact may be the only plausible public relations strategy the leadership has at its disposal. For Kim Jong-un’s populist line of political reasoning to work, the hardships being endured have to be pinned on someone else and the sanctions-wielding international community and COVID are the most obvious candidates. The speech continued the openly dour tone of the regime’s own pronouncements since at least the 5th Plenum in December 2019. That year saw the first open admission in years of serious food shortages, followed by a rapid food assessment by the World Food Program and Food and Agriculture Organization in May that detailed the production shortfalls and even provided survey evidence of household distress.

Chinese sanctions have resulted in a dramatic fall off in North Korean exports over the course of 2019, but Chinese exports to the North remained surprisingly buoyant. When the regime rightly decided to take COVID seriously, the China trade dropped to practically nothing, at least in the official statistics. While the regime clings to the myth that there are no COVID cases in North Korea, magnanimously offering condolences to other countries, the speech openly admits the cost of vigilance; indeed, the pandemic makes several appearances in the speech as an indirect source of the country’s economic travails.

### **Foreign Policy and the Weapons**

Economic motives may have been at work in the brief but friendly mention of the South (that the “day would come when the north and south take each other’s hand again.”) The weapons on display, however, suggested that North Korea continues to invest heavily in a number of missile platforms. Analysis of these will be forthcoming over the course of the week, and there is the mock-up problem; we don’t know how far along these weapons are and they have certainly not been tested. But Vann van Diepen and Michael Elleman have a good first pass at 38North; interestingly, state media in China also offered detailed analysis.

The two biggest surprises were a massive new road-mobile (but probably liquid-fueled) ICBM, sitting atop an 11-axle transporter erector launcher (a Hwasong 16 if we continue the numbering convention) and a new submarine-launched ballistic missile (the Pukguksong

4). The larger question—as always—is what are the North Koreans doing? The simple answer is that this is not so much a political signal as it is yet another step on the road to the deterrent capacity they want to acquire. Sometimes it makes sense to simply take the North Koreans at their word. In Kim Jong-un's words:

“We have built a deterrent with which we can satisfactorily control and manage any military threats that we are facing or may face. Our military capability is changing in the rate of its growth and in its quality and quantity in our own style and in accordance with our demands and our timetable.”

A larger ICBM could permit more decoys, heavier payloads or even MIRVing.

Although the speech made no mention of the U.S. (Chinese official media also made this point), however, it is hard not to read this through a diplomatic strategic lens. Yes, the timing of the parade and the U.S. elections is coincidental. Nonetheless, the challenge of North Korea's steadily-increasing capability will now land on the desk of President Trump in a second term, or more likely with a Biden administration. Kim Jong-un tried to straddle a line, displaying a large new ICBM and at the same time repeatedly emphasizing the defensive nature of these new systems, perhaps to leave diplomatic doors open.

Yet even on that score, the effort to reassure about North Korean nuclear doctrine left ambiguity. While explicitly saying that North Korea foregoes pre-emption, the speech simultaneously noted that “if any forces *infringe* upon the security of our state and *attempt* to have recourse to military force against us, I will enlist all our most powerful offensive strength in advance to punish them.” Although nuclear war around the Korean peninsula remains a low probability, North Korean nuclear doctrine is the source of as much uncertainty as the weapons themselves.

*Stephan Haggard is a Non-Resident Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute and the Lawrence and Sallye Krause Professor of Korea-Pacific Studies, Director of the Korea-Pacific Program and distinguished professor of political science at the School of Global Policy and Strategy University of California San Diego.*

*Photo from Stefan Krasowski's photostream on flickr Creative Commons.*

© 2007-2011 Korea Economic Institute | All Rights Reserved.

Web Design by Blue Water Media