



THE PENINSULA

What the Ninth Party Congress Tells Us About Where North Korea Is Headed

Published February 26, 2026

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Category: [Indo-Pacific](#)



The Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), North Korea's only political party and the ruling party, held its Ninth Party Congress in Pyongyang on February 19–23, 2026. The congress, held every five years for the past several decades, establishes the country's direction and policy focus for the next five years. This year's party congress established the country's next five-year plan, prioritizing economic development, standard of living, continued military development, and the reinforcement of self-reliance in the face of external instability.

Kim Jong Un Addresses the Party Congress

The principal aspect of the congress was a lengthy speech or a series of speeches from Kim to the assembled delegates. Kim's report on the Central Committee of the WPK's work from 2021 to 2025 and plans for the future spanned two or more days, including a "programmatic conclusion" outlining future goals. This was Kim's longest speech thus far. Kim's report at the Eighth Party Congress in 2021 lasted nine hours, and his first speech as leader at the Seventh Party Congress in 2016 lasted only about three hours.

In the speech, Kim said the five-year plan (2026–2030) would "stabilize and consolidate" the economy and should focus on the "qualitative development" of industry and agriculture rather than quantitative growth. He called for raising living standards and cited the completion of 50,000 new homes during the 2021–2025 period as a particularly important achievement. Kim said economic improvement and raising the standard of living were "heavy and urgent historic tasks."

Because he was addressing the party leadership, Kim also called for greater dedication and commitment from the party faithful, criticizing some officials for “extreme negligence.” He called for rooting out “defeatism and incompetence” in the party, serving as a warning that party officials must be responsive to his demands.

Although strengthening the economy was the leading theme of his instructions, Kim reaffirmed the government’s efforts to develop nuclear weapons and missiles while also calling for strengthening conventional armed forces. The provision of North Korean soldiers to support Russian military efforts in Ukraine has significantly benefited the North Korean military. As of February 2026, some 15,000 North Korean troops have been sent to support Russia’s war against Ukraine, sustaining heavy casualties. This has been an important boon to flagging Russian troops, but it has also helped improve relations between North Korea and Russia. The Russian veto in early 2024 that ended UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea for its nuclear testing and production was very important for Kim. Since North Korean troops joined Russian troops in Ukraine, the two countries have had an even closer and more cordial relationship.

One of the more interesting footnotes to Kim’s addresses to the party congress was that he did not mention either the United States or South Korea, including his concluding speech on February 23. The theme of his final speech was “single-hearted unity” and overcoming “hostile forces” through self-reliance—the “hostile forces” were never specifically identified.

The Lee Jae Myung administration has made conciliatory gestures toward North Korea since June 2025, including removing loudspeakers along their shared border. Just days before the party congress, South Korea’s Minister of Unification acknowledged that three civilian South Koreans had sent drones across the border into North Korea on several occasions between September 2025 and January 2026. The minister announced the opening of an ongoing investigation and expressed “official regret” over the incident. Kim Yo Jong, Kim Jong Un’s sister and a senior party official, issued a response that the government “highly appreciated Seoul’s commitment to preventing a recurrence.” At the same time, she warned that “the borderline with the enemy should be firmly guarded” and that the South would face “terrible consequences” if such violations occurred again.

In his second term as U.S. president, Donald Trump has made only a few comments about resuming contact with Kim. He seems to be focusing on other, more pressing hotspots such as Gaza, Iran, and Venezuela. Trump has not initiated an effort to meet with Kim again. The North Korean leader has also been receiving considerable attention from Vladimir Putin for sending North Korean soldiers to Ukraine, which suggests that Kim sees little benefit from improved relations with the United States under the present circumstances. Kim’s failure to mention either the United States or South Korea in his lengthy addresses clearly indicates a lack of interest in improved U.S.-North Korea relations or inter-Korean dialogue.

Military Parade Highlights New Weapons

The grand finale of the party congress is always the military parade, which highlights North Korea’s modern, well-equipped armed forces. The parade is public, well-photographed, and highlights the country’s latest military equipment. An estimated 12,000 to 16,000 troops were involved in the extravaganza ending the congress. In

addition, missiles and tanks highlight the North's advanced technology and the quantity of equipment it has developed. Rehearsals for the parade were taking place in Pyongyang two months before the event.

Before the party congress sessions formally opened, Kim visited troops preparing for the military parade. North Korean media showed the leader in a leather military jacket behind the wheel of one of the new multiple rocket launchers for 600 mm rockets—the unveiling of the new capabilities. These weapons have the capability of reaching targets ranging up to 400 kilometers, which puts all of South Korea within range, and are capable of carrying tactical nuclear weapons. Newspaper photographs showed fifty mobile rocket launchers in front of the April 25 House of Culture, the venue of the party congress.

One of the reasons for the North Korean leader to tout his country's offensive military capabilities, including its nuclear weapons and missiles, is the recent U.S. military actions in Venezuela with the seizure of President Nicolas Maduro, in addition to continued U.S. support for Ukraine.

All in the Family

The party congress also highlighted the Kim family's grip on power in North Korea. Kim's sister, Kim Yo Jong, was appointed head of one of the party's departments, an important and prestigious post. She had previously served as deputy head of a party department. Kim Yo Jong remains one of the most closely followed North Korean officials, and it is clear that her brother relies on her to handle sensitive issues.

One of the more intriguing familial elements of the just-concluded congress is speculation that Kim Jon Un's daughter may be designated heir apparent to the supreme leader. On the eve of the party congress, a member of the South Korean National Assembly told reporters that in a closed-door briefing with the South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS), lawmakers were told that Kim's daughter, Kim Ju Ae, had been formally designated his successor, while she was previously described as only "in study as successor."

Other media reports during the party congress indicated that Kim Ju Ae was the "missile general director," which is particularly unusual given that she is quite young and is unlikely to have the technical expertise to manage such an important, scientifically complex weapon. Missiles are particularly sensitive and important for North Korea's military. If it is true that she holds that position, it is unlikely that she is a hands-on manager involved in missile development, testing, and production, but it is a clear indication of the party's high priority on missile development. That action also gives the apparent successor an aura of importance and bolsters reports that she is the heir apparent.

However, there is no indication that she was formally acknowledged as a successor at the party congress. No mention of her presence at the opening session was made in the media, suggesting that her formal designation as her father's successor is premature. If she had been present at the congress, however, that would have been a clear indicator of her successor status.

One interesting aspect of this story is that North Korea is not a country where women are given equal opportunity or treatment. UN Special Rapporteur Elizabeth Salmon, who reports annually to the UN Human Rights Council and UN General Assembly on human rights abuses in North Korea, has been particularly sharp in her criticism of

officially sanctioned abuse of women in North Korea. Professor Salmon reported that Pyongyang has “failed to take any meaningful action to address the country’s intense and pervasive women’s rights violations, including sexual and gender-based violence, widespread discrimination, and enforcement of rigid gender stereotypes.”

The makeup of the delegates to the Ninth Party Congress confirms the persistent inequality in the treatment of women in North Korea. The congress had a total of 5,000 delegates, and of that number, only 413 were women (8.26 percent). Furthermore, that was a *decline* from the party congress ten years ago in 2016, when 501 of the delegates were women.

The personnel changes made at the Ninth Party Congress do not appear to be unusual. For the most part, the leadership changes, such as those on the Central Committee, largely appear to be generational shifts. Older cadres were given “senior advisor” positions elsewhere, or they were retired, while younger individuals are stepping in to replace them on the Central Committee.

Conclusion

The Ninth Party Congress leaves little room for optimism about near-term engagement with North Korea. Kim Jong Un has a new five-year plan, a closer relationship with Moscow, a sister with an expanded portfolio, and a daughter who may already be designated his successor, while offering no mention of the United States or South Korea. Trump, for his part, has shown little urgency about resuming dialogue, instead focusing on other geopolitical hotspots. Without diplomatic movement, North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs will continue to develop on their own timeline, and the window for meaningful leverage will narrow. The congress made clear that Pyongyang is comfortable with that trajectory. Washington and Seoul may not be able to say the same for long.

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Feature image from North Korean state media.

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Return to the Peninsula



THE PENINSULA

South Korea's Strategy for Securing Critical Minerals as FORGE

Chair

Published February 24, 2026

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Category: [Indo-Pacific](#)



The inaugural Critical Minerals Ministerial was held in Washington, DC, on February 4, drawing significant attention to multilateral cooperation on securing mineral resources. The Donald Trump administration, which restructured the Mineral Security Partnership (MSP) into the Forum on Resource Geostrategic Engagement (FORGE), proposed to the fifty-four participating countries and the European Commission the creation of a “preferred critical minerals trade zone protected from external shocks through enforceable price floors.” In doing so, the administration signaled its commitment to stabilizing and diversifying critical mineral supply chains.

What is noteworthy about the launch of FORGE is that it marks a shift for the Trump administration—previously known for favoring bilateral deals—toward promoting a multilateral framework for international cooperation. The presence of more than five U.S. cabinet officials, including Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, underscores that strengthening critical mineral supply chains is an urgent policy priority for the administration. It will be important to watch how U.S. multilateral cooperation evolves from this starting point.

Critical minerals have unquestionably emerged as a central issue in U.S.-China strategic competition. China began responding to U.S. semiconductor export controls by imposing its own critical mineral export restrictions in July 2023, during the Joe Biden administration. Since then, Beijing has expanded export controls to other minerals and

materials such as rare-earth magnets—essential components in electric vehicle motors, consumer electronics, and weapons systems—turning them into a major source of leverage during the Trump administration as well.

Why, then, is China's weaponization of critical minerals so powerful? First, China holds significant market influence across the entire supply chain—from upstream mining to midstream refining and processing, downstream manufacturing, and recycling. In particular, refining and processing facilities and technologies are heavily concentrated in China, giving it a dominant position at the midstream stage, where it can restrict or control supplies. These “chokepoints” are difficult to overcome in the short term, given environmental concerns, high upfront investment costs, and other constraints associated with building refining capacity.

Second, Chinese firms have secured stable access to overseas critical minerals through direct investment and equity acquisitions in mining companies and facilities in resource-rich regions such as Latin America and Africa.

Third, China has recognized vulnerabilities in its own supply chains and has subsequently pursued diversification of its mineral import sources. According to recent research, China relied on Australia for more than 85 percent of its spodumene imports—a key source of lithium—but has reduced this dependence over the past four years by diversifying its imports from countries such as Brazil, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe.

The weaponization of critical minerals is a grave issue that could destabilize global industrial supply chains and pose existential challenges to industrialized economies. Ahead of President Trump's planned visit to China in late March, the administration is seeking to conclude tariff negotiations while simultaneously restructuring mineral supply chains and developing countermeasures to reduce China's leverage.

Over the past several years, South Korea has pursued import diversification, strengthened strategic dialogue and cooperation with resource-rich countries, expanded strategic stockpiles, and promoted recycling to reduce dependence on China. These efforts remain insufficient, however. As chair of FORGE through June, South Korea must move beyond domestic measures and develop a more refined multilateral strategy to enhance global supply chain stability.

This article was originally published in Korean in Hankook Ilbo on February 20.

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Feature image from the U.S. Department of State's YouTube channel.

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THE PENINSULA

Takaichi's Landslide Victory and What It Means for South Korea

Published February 23, 2026

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Category: [Indo-Pacific](#)



In early February, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi led the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to a stunning victory in the House of Representatives. But her landslide victory can cut both ways, strengthening her hand on domestic policy while also freeing her to revisit conservative positions that have historically strained ties with South Korea.

The LDP's historic 316-seat victory in the [lower house elections](#) has consolidated Prime Minister Takaichi's power. As [Japan analyst Tobias Harris writes](#), the large win means "it will be difficult for her intra-party rivals...to question her leadership" in the party. The win is also a public mandate, demonstrating the depth of her popularity with the broader electorate. Voters say they appreciate her public policy approach, focusing on the cost of living, for example, and her pushback against pressure from China. Takaichi "seems like a capable and dependable person. I feel she could be the one to change Japan," [one voter told The Wall Street Journal](#) before the election. "I think she's popular because she's different from what it's been like before."

This is not to suggest that the Takaichi government is invincible, as the LDP and its coalition partner, the Japan Innovation Party, still hold a minority in the upper house of the National Diet. While the lower chamber can enact laws over the upper house's opposition, the upper house can force deliberation that takes up time and bandwidth. This means that even if Prime Minister Takaichi has the votes in the lower chamber, "it does not mean that anything can simply be repassed," [law professor Junsuke Matsuura](#)

told the Japanese press. While it is unclear whether she will be able to live up to the tenure of her mentor, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, it seems Prime Minister Takaichi is firmly in control of Japan.

Meanwhile, South Korea's official response to Takaichi's victory has been deliberately measured, even if the Korean press has been less sanguine. The liberal *Hankyoreh* newspaper published an editorial fretting about "right-wing populism" rising in Japan. But President Lee Jae Myung indicated that he is not as worried about his counterpart in Tokyo. The president congratulated the prime minister on her party's victory. "I hope the two countries will broaden and deepen relations based on trust and friendship," President Lee stated. In turn, Prime Minister Takaichi thanked him and said, "Let us advance Japan-Korea relations in a future-oriented and stable manner," adding that she was excited about her next chance to visit Korea as part of their "shuttle diplomacy."

Issues That Could Test Korea-Japan Cooperation

If Korea-Japan relations do deteriorate under Lee and Takaichi, there are two likely catalysts. The first is the resurfacing of history. At the end of January, the Korean Supreme Court ordered Japanese construction firm Kumagai Gumi to pay KRW 100 million (some USD 70,000) to the family of a Korean man conscripted to work for the company in October 1944. The decision overturned a lower court decision in the suit, filed in April 2019, that found the statute of limitations had already passed. A National Assembly committee also passed a bill that would allow the South Korean government to hand out prison sentences to individuals that it deems to have engaged in misinformation about sexual slavery under Imperial Japan. President Lee had recently publicly criticized a far-right Korean group that questioned the experiences of comfort women.

President Lee was also critical of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration's solution to forced labor compensation, but said that he would respect the deal made by the previous administration after taking office. How will he manage domestic public opinion if Japanese companies refuse to pay compensation to the families of forced laborers?

In 2014, Prime Minister Takaichi wrote in a letter to then Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga that it was wrong for Japanese history textbooks to use words like "military comfort women" and "forced abduction." While she has not commented on the issue as prime minister, it's not clear that she has changed her opinions. After all, after the February election, she said, "I will secure understanding from our ally and neighboring countries" ahead of a potential visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. These domestic issues have significant implications for foreign affairs and will require finesse in both Seoul and Tokyo to manage.

The second issue concerns the growing difficulties Korea faces in balancing between the United States and China. Takaichi has been successful in maintaining a relationship with U.S. President Donald Trump, even getting an endorsement on social media ahead of the election. She is strongly pro-American, and Japan is moving closer to the United States at a time when other traditional allies have had difficulties with the Trump administration. Within the trilateral U.S.-Korea-Japan framework, the Korea-Japan leg has always been the shakiest. If the U.S.-Japan leg gets closer, Korea could find itself in a tight spot by being outmaneuvered or facing unified opposition by the larger sides of the triangle. Until now, domestic political weakness may have encouraged Japanese leaders to be more cautious in their policymaking when it came to Korea. "Seoul must decide how much bilateral alignment it is prepared to offer, where it needs to articulate its own priorities and how to communicate its expectations in ways that protect both

security interests and domestic legitimacy,” wrote former CIA analyst Soo Kim in a [Korean media commentary](#) published after the election. This is not to suggest that Korea-Japan relations are headed for a downward spiral; indeed, it is worth noting that the progressive President Lee and conservative Prime Minister Takaichi were quick to play nice together (quite literally, actually). Rather, these potential obstacles serve as a reminder that we should not take the current environment for granted.

Managing Continuity and Risk

Korea is no stranger to a complicated international environment that requires a deft hand. And to be sure, President Lee has said he will take a pragmatic approach toward Japan. Relations between Seoul and Tokyo have improved significantly since the lows of a decade ago, and recent leaders have indicated that they value a productive and positive relationship.

Prime Minister Takaichi’s consolidation of power at home means that it will be easier for her to push unpopular policies while keeping her party in line. But to maintain control, she may have to say some things that her domestic audience wants to hear but could upset foreign audiences. While Prime Minister Takaichi’s victory may be talked about for years, it will take steady hands in both Korea and Japan to keep the bilateral relationship chugging along.

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The views expressed are the authors’ alone.*

Feature image from [Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi’s X account](#)

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