



## 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea

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On 5–12 January, the 8th Congress of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea was held. Decisions adopted during this meeting suggest the intent to tighten state control over the economy. North Korea will also develop its nuclear and missile programmes, treating them as elements of pressure on the U.S. and South Korea. The confrontational nature of the North Korean leadership's decisions increases the risk of escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula and further reduces the prospects of talks with the U.S. on denuclearisation.

### What is the Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea?

It is the most important Party gathering in North Korea, during which the authorities review the achievements of recent years, define the vision of the state's development, and elect the party leadership. In the last 41 years, the Congress was held only three times: the 6<sup>th</sup> in 1980, the 7<sup>th</sup> in 2016, and the 8<sup>th</sup> session this year. During this year's Congress, it was agreed that they will be held every five years. The meetings of the Congress serve primarily to consolidate the party around the leader. This year, Kim Jong-un strengthened his position by being elected as general-secretary of WPK—a position previously reserved for his father, Kim Jong-il, posthumously appointed "eternal general secretary".

### What does the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress mean for North Korea's economy?

Kim Jong-un admitted that North Korea failed to meet the targets of the five-year economic plan for 2016–2020 in almost every sector. In his opinion, this was due to sanctions, natural disasters, the economic consequences of COVID-19, and insufficient party activities. The new five-year plan for 2021-2025 will focus on increasing "self-dependence and self-sufficiency" and tightening state control over the economy. This is in line with the [gradual withdrawal from reforms liberalising the economy, observed since 2019](#). This policy was strengthened during the pandemic by limiting informal market activity. Because of the deteriorating economic situation and the lack of an alternative, the crucial

factor for the economic stability of North Korea will be intensified cooperation with China, which will make the North more dependent on China.

### How will Party Congress decisions affect North Korea's relations with the U.S. and the denuclearisation process?

North Korea defines the U.S. as the "principal enemy" and rules out talks on denuclearisation. Plans for the development of many types of weapons, including tactical nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles, increase the likelihood of nuclear and missile tests in the coming months. This serves to strengthen North Korea's negotiating position ahead of talks with the new U.S. administration, which [policy towards the North will only be clarified in the following months](#). The North is trying to persuade the U.S. to make concessions, including initiating negotiations on topics other than denuclearisation, such as nuclear arms control. If the Biden administration maintains the current U.S. position on complete denuclearisation, North Korea may decide to test weapons, which will increase the risk of an escalation of tensions, similar to the one in 2017.

### What do the Party Congress decisions mean for inter-Korean relations?

North Korea maintains a confrontational attitude towards the South, blaming it for the worsening of relations, which, from the North's perspective, returned before [the inter-Korean summit in April 2018](#). The North accuses the South of continuing manoeuvres with the U.S. and developing its

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military potential. North Korea makes the resumption of dialogue dependent on the attitude of the South Korean authorities, trying to persuade them to limit alliance cooperation with the U.S. This complicates the plans of President Moon Jae-in of South Korea, who is interested in sectoral cooperation with North Korea, such as humanitarian assistance during the pandemic, and mediating between the new U.S. administration and North Korea's authorities. South Korea is also reluctant to limit or cancel the manoeuvres with the U.S., which are [necessary to take wartime operational control of its armed forces](#).

### **What does it mean for relations between North Korea and the European Union?**

The Party Congress decisions will make it difficult to improve EU-North Korea relations, which have been at an impasse for years. This is reflected in the lack of political dialogue and the limitation of the EU's North Korea policy to the use of economic sanctions on the North. The possible escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula will induce the EU to put even greater pressure on North Korea. Due to the [questionable effectiveness of this policy](#), the EU and its Member States may signal the U.S. and South Korea willingness to support their diplomatic activities towards North Korea. The use of EU communication channels (North Korea has embassies in eight EU countries, including Poland) may serve to resume the meetings between negotiators and experts from the U.S. and both Koreas, contributing to the search for the diplomatic resolution of disputes.