North Korea’s Political Problem

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"North Korea's Political Problem: The Regime Survival Strategy"

By Young Whan Kihl

I. Introduction

The following essay was originally prepared for the conference on "Korea In The 21st Century: In Search for Peace, Unification and Prosperity," held at Chongju University, ROK, June 2-3, 1997, and appeared in the summer 1997 issue of "The Economics of Korean Unification." The author, Young Whan Kihl, is a professor at Iowa State University, where his areas of teaching include International Politics, Foreign Policy, and Comparative Asian Politics. His most recent books include "Korea and the World: Beyond the Cold War," and " Rethinking the Korean Peninsula: Arms Control, Nuclear Issues and Economic Reformation." He is on the editorial board, since 1992, of the "Journal of Asian Studies," where he serves as a book review editor on Korea. Nautilus reprints this essay with the author's permission. All opinions expressed are the author's own. Nautilus presents the essay as received, except for minor grammatical editing.

The author argues that the foremost political problem of the DPRK today is the survival of the Kim Jong-il regime. Included in the Kim Jong-il regime's survival strategy are: (a) building legitimacy via father-son succession, (b) emphasis on the Juche ideology, as interpreted by Kim Jong-il, and (c) reliance on the military support and internal security forces for regime maintenance. Ultimately, Kim will need to build his own charisma via achievement-oriented performance, such as resuscitating the stagnant economy and increasing food production. The Kim Jong-il regime's strategy is thus to avoid the responsibility for the failing economy and poor performance by blaming the party cadres, and their alleged failure to mobilize the masses and to lead them. So long as the Kim regime tinkers with token measures of reform, rather than the drastic surgery and reforms that are needed to resuscitate the stagnant and failing economy, the prospect for the regime survival and restoring political "life after death" in the DPRK is rather grim. On foreign policy fronts the Kim regime pursues the strategy of (a) avoiding the ROK, as much as possible, (b) seeking direct access to the US, and (c) working to sabotage the armistice agreement regime by pressuring to replace it

by a permanent peace treaty with the United States. The strategic goal of the DPRK continues to be forcing US troop withdrawal from the ROK, so as to enable the DPRK to realize its dream of Korean reunification in its own terms, i.e., the communization of the ROK by whatever means are deemed necessary, including the use of force.

II. Essay by Young Whan Kihl

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Introduction

When the cold war ended globally, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992, there was an upsurge of optimism that the Korean cold war system would also come to an end. This anticipation of a Korean endgame, however, has proven to be ill-founded.(Kihl, 1997) An imminent collapse of the North Korean regime, despite every kind of difficulty, has not come about for a variety of reasons.

The North Korean political system has proven to be durable and resilient despite all odds against it. The North Korean economy has continued to decline, aggravated by serious food and energy shortages. This was compounded by the signs of elite and mass disaffection as shown by the recent increase in the defection of North Koreans. Between 1990 and 1996 a total of 174 North Koreans defected to the South, as contrasted with 65 in the 1960s, 15 in the 1970s, and 49 in the 1980s. (Suh, 1996: 335) The high profile defection of Korean Workers' Party (KWP) Secretary Hwang Jang Yop to South Korea in April 1997, via China and the Philippines, is the latest episode showing North Korea in trouble.

What are the sources of system viability and regime survivability in North Korea? Is it the leadership, the ideology or the institution that gives the North Korean communism a lease on life and staying power, or is the post-Kim Il Sung regime on the last leg of a tortuous journey, a moribund "Jurassic Park" nearing an eventual death and dismemberment as a political entity? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Kim Jong Il as a newly anointed leader in the post-Kim Il Sung era? Will Korea in the 21st century witness national reunification following peaceful coexistence or forceful reintegration in the form of absorption of the North by the South?

A. Domestic Basis of Rejuvenated North Korea

After the death in July 1994 of Kim Il Sung, who founded the DPRK in 1948 and inaugurated the Juche ideology in December 1955, his son Kim Jong Il took over the reign of North Korean politics. The preparation for father-son political succession took many years. The primary means through which Kim Jong Il's preparatory work was undertaken consisted in Kim junior becoming the theoretician on Juche and the supreme commander of the military in December 1991. The domestic political basis of Kim Jong Il's power and reign in post-Kim Il Sung North Korea is thus his claims on the ideology of Juche, and his control of the military and internal security forces.

a) The Juche ideology: In North Korean ideology (Juche) reigns over politics (dictatorship of the Suryong or Ryongdoja, the Great Leader). Although North Korea adopted Marxism-Leninism as its ruling philosophy when it proclaimed the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948, Marxism-Leninism was replaced by the so-called Juche ideology, which it alleged was a creative application of Marxism- Leninism to suit North Korea. A constitutional

revision in 1992, however, deleted reference to Marxism-Leninism as it stipulates that "the Democratic People's Republic of Korea makes Juche ideology, a revolutionary ideology with a people-centered view of the world that aims to realize the independence of the masses, the guiding principle of its actions." (A Handbook, 1996: 11)

The North Korean Dictionary of Philosophy published in Pyongyang defines Juche ideology as "Kim Il Sung's revolutionary idea." The word "Juche" was used for the first time by Kim Il Sung on December 28, 1955, when he made a speech entitled, "On the Need to Repel Dogmatism and Formalism and to Establish Juche in Carrying Out Ideological Projects." But North Korea has begun to use the terms, "Juche ideology," since December 6, 1967, when Kim Il Sung, in a speech to the 1st session of the 4th-term Supreme People's Assembly under the heading, "Let Us Materialize Our Self-Reliant, Independent and Self-Defensive Lines Completely," said, "Our Juche Ideology refers to the most correct Marxism-Leninism-oriented guiding philosophy designed to carry out our revolution and construction." (A Handbook, 1996: 73)

Juche (self-reliance) ideology consists mainly of two parts -- the philosophical theory, which maintains that the masses are the masters of history and revolution, and the guiding principles, or the "Revolutionary View of the Leader," which asserts that "nonetheless the masses are not able to take up spontaneously any revolutionary course unless they are organized into revolutionary forces and are led by the Suryong (the Leader)." (A Handbook, 1996: 11)

Although Juche ideology was created by Kim Il Sung, Pyongyang claims that the idea was further developed into a man-centered philosophy by Kim Jong Il. This claim has been part of Pyongyang's argument since the early 1970s and was used to justify a plan for the junior Kim's dynastic succession and to cement his status as the indisputable successor to his father.

In the 1980s, North Korea maintained that Kim Jong Il developed the concept of the "Revolutionary View" into a more theoretical and systematized form by presenting the "Theory of the Immortal Socio- Political Body." It says that the Suryong, the Party and the masses are integrated into an immortal socio-political body, the brain (center) of which is the Suryong, and that physical life, which is mortal, is given by the parents, but political life, which is immortal, is given by this socio-political body, and therefore, the masses are only required to obey unconditionally the brain of the body, which is the Suryong.

b) The Military and Control Mechanism: Since the death of his father in 1994 Kim Jong Il has ruled North Korea in his capacity as the Supreme Commander of the People's Army and as Chairman of the National Defense Commission. Kim Jong Il was given the title of Supreme Commander by his father, on December 24, 1991, although he had not served in the military. As of May 1997 he had not acquired the post of the President of the DPRK or that of the General Secretary of the KWP, the two important titles which his father held at the time of his death.

This fact suggests that Kim Jong Il's power base is not strong enough and that he is still engaged in the task of consolidating his authority. Since the posts in the state and the party remain vacant, North Korea's Kim Jong Il is for all practical purposes a military dictator and his government is a military regime or praetorian state rather than a civilian normal regime or a party state of the ruling KWP.

It is not surprising to see, therefore, that for three years consecutively the New Year Address was given not by the top leadership in person, as in the days of Kim Il Sung, but in the form of a joint editorial of three organs of the KWP, the People's Army, and the Socialist Youth League. The 1997 New Year editorial, under the heading of "Let Us Make Our Country and Our Fatherland Wealthier Under the Leadership of the Great Party," has revealed not only major North Korean policies set for

1997 but also the dual rule of North Korea by the military and the party bureaucracy and its auxiliary body, the youth organization. To safeguard the North Korean brand of socialism, apart from solving economic problems, including the food shortage, and standing firm on reunification of the fatherland, the editorial called for campaigns to dye the country with the "Red Banner Spirit" and for unconditional loyalty to Kim Jong Il as Supreme Army Commander and indisputable successor-designate. (Vantage Point, January 1997: 1)

The editorial said: "Soldiers and officers of the People's Army are the pillars of our revolution and the main forces in a drive to complete Juche tasks. All of them are required to prepare themselves as the prime life-guards and brave troops for the supreme commander holding high the slogan, "Let Us Safeguard the Command Post of the Revolution Led by Great Comrade Kim Jong Il."

What keeps the regime afloat and intact is the military and internal security forces deployed as the instrument of coercive rule. In the meantime the Kim Jong Il regime has become a crisis management team that puts the regime survivability into effect as the highest priority.

The North Korean military has been the mainstay of Kim Il Sung as well as of Kim Jong Il. For this reason North Korea's policy has always placed first priority on military affairs. In 1960 the North Korean Worker's Party adopted the so-called "Four-Point Military Guidelines" policy designed to arm the entire people, fortify the entire land, covert all members of the People's Army into cadres, and modernize the People's Army. The military has been nurtured to function as Suryong's political tool, personally loyal to him (Kim Il Sung and, now, Kim Jong Il), and to protect him. Under these circumstances the North Korean military has been given special privileges so that it can enjoy various advantages, making it enjoy a sense of superiority over ordinary citizens.

North Korea also set up an efficient command and control system where the military is placed under complete control by the Suryong and the party and military command channel are fully integrated into one. North Korea under Kim Jong Il is required to focus upon fortifying the party and the political networks in the military. The latter, in turn, performs two major functions: as a special organization within the military, it conducts strict political surveillance over all military members in order to prevent them from engaging in activities that run counter to the Kim regime's policies, and (2) it plans and conducts various programs to spur military members on to abide faithfully by regime policies. (Jeung Young Tai, 1996: 341-42)

North Korea maintains an effective political surveillance mechanism to control the population. For the tighter control of its citizens, North Korea since 1967 has implemented a three-fold classification system of the population into separate categories: (1) the core class (about 28% of the total population) comprising those regarded as absolutely loyal to the Workers Party, (2) the "unstable class" (about 45% of the population) including ordinary workers, and (3) the "hostile class" (about 27% of the population) that include families of defectors to South Korea and those classified as dissidents. (A Handbook, 1996: 19) The political surveillance mechanism consists of the state security agency and the public security ministry. The former is a secret police which monitors the citizens' political behavior, while the latter office performs the function of the ordinary police while responsible at the same time for conducting political surveillance. (A Handbook, 1996: 20)

B. Life and Death Matters: Failing Economy and Food Shortage

Despite adversity and hardship in life, due to the failed economy aggravated by severe energy and food shortages, the life in North Korea continues. The institution of the Korean Workers' Party and the leadership principle employed by Kim Jong Il and his followers are the other indispensable resources and instruments that sustain post-Kim Il Sung North Korea despite the severe hardship of the life and death situation in the North.

In late 1993 North Korea admitted for the first time that a seven-year plan had failed and that it was supposedly succeeded by a vague "adjustment period" of two to three years. It announced at the same time that priority would go to three sectors: light industry, farming and foreign trade. The three years are now up, but there is no word of any new overall economic line. Possibly, the North Koreans are working on a reform package soon to be announced. (EIU, 1997)

The extensive militarization of North Korea has skewed the economy toward heavy industry as opposed to light industry, thereby depressing consumer production. A highly independent and autonomous military economy exists, one that has absorbed a huge portion of the manpower and capital available. Over-planning and bureaucratization also add to the economy's defects, along with limited worker incentives or initiatives insensitive to market forces.

Without drastic reform measures first, the crisis management undertaken by North Korea will not succeed in the long run. Since the mid-1980s North Korea has engaged in such "informal" economic activities as black- marketeering, smuggling, and wide-ranging unproductive commission- seeking activities. (Oh, 1996, p. 343). In the 1990s the scope and scale of these illegal activities have expanded drastically as a result of a loosening attitude of the regime towards market mechanisms. These practices, however, are far from the signs of an imminent collapse of the regime. Instead, they are evidence of the regime's desperation for coping with the economic difficulties and determination to survive in the immediate sense. As noted by one observer, expansion of an informal economic sphere in North Korea today "is neither a symptom of system collapse nor a prelude to market-oriented reform." Instead, it is only "a short-term effective survival strategy" for the Pyongyang regime. (Oh, 1996, p. 344).

The economic downturn was also related to the loss of market access to the former Soviet Union and East European socialist countries after 1990. Pyongyang's oil imports have fallen from a typical 2.65 million tons in 1989, in the good old days when it was piped in at "friendship" prices from both the former Soviet Union and China, to 1.36 million tons in 1993 and 1.1 million tons in 1995. Many factories are effectively idle, operating at less than 30% of capacity. (EIU, "Country Report on South Korea and North Korea," London: EIU, 1st quarter 1997, p. 49.)

The military has, in turn, become the crisis management team not only for safeguarding the regime but also for carrying out existing economic programs. For instance, Kim Jong Il issued orders instructing the People's Armed Forces Ministry to complete the construction of two projects in Pyongyang by October 20, 1998. It called on the Administration Council to supply in time equipment and materials necessary for the program--for the second-phase construction of the Chongryu Bridge and the building of the No. 2 Mumrung Tunnel. (Vantage Point, March 1997: 3)

The severe food shortage in North Korea was aggravated initially by crop failures in 1995 and 1996 induced by floods. But the continued crop failure in the North is a result of basic structural problems rather than seasonal fluctuations and natural disasters.

The first step in alleviating the food shortage in North Korea is to ascertain the facts of what is going on inside the country. North Korea in 1996 produced 2.5 million tons of food grain, compared with its annual demand amounting to 4.82 million tons, according to the North Korean Central News Agency report on February 3, 1997, which quoted a spokesman of Pyongyang's committee for countering flood damages. This was lower than the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization estimates of 3.55 million tons of grain production in 1996, with the demand for 6.7 million tons for 1997, and the South Korean government estimates of 3.69 million tons of output and the demand of 6.77 million tons. (Vantage Point, February 1997: 25)

The severe food shortage in North Korea epitomizes the bankruptcy and failure of its economic and

agricultural policies. Without drastic reforms in agriculture, possibly introducing an incentive system for the farmers, as did Deng in China in 1979, there is no prospect of the North Korean food problem improving overnight. As Hwang Jang Yop, who defected to South Korea, noted: "What good is socialism in North Korea when its citizens are starving to death?"

C. Foreign Relations: Sadaechui Placed on Its Head?

The DPRK foreign policy, under Kim Jong Il, remains rational and coherent in its pursuit of a consistent set of objectives. Pyongyang's foreign policy objective is to achieve diplomatic normalization with the United States and Japan, while relegating the ROK to the sidelines (Scalapino, 1997: 16). The reason why the progress is slow in the normalization talks with the U.S. and Japan, however, is the lack of improvements in North-South relations, improvements which Pyongyang has failed to realize for domestic political reasons following the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994. Pyongyang realizes that, once economic exchanges and cooperation between the two sides are put into effect, North Korea will need to open its door to the outside and be forced to carry out economic reforms. Because of the possible political fallout from an economic open door, the North Korean elites have decided that the time is not right for the regime to abandon its autarchic and self-reliant policy.

Although Kim Jong Il remains isolated and reclusive as a leader, the North Korean foreign policy has demonstrated skill and sophistication in its diplomacy. The regime has a strategic goal and policy lines that it wishes to carry out with efficiency and effectiveness. Pyongyang conducts its diplomatic negotiations with both adversaries and allies with tact and determination. It has proved time and again, as demonstrated by its negotiations with the United States on the nuclear and other-related issues, that its style of bargaining is not only tough but is also governed by the rules of minimax, i.e., minimization of cost and risk and maximization of benefit and reward.

Pyongyang also seems to have a clear-cut set of strategic objectives in conducting diplomatic negotiations and bargaining that rarely deviate from such pre-established strategic goals and plans. The DPRK has rarely deviated, for instance, from the long-lasting policy line of forcing the U.S. troop withdrawals from the South. This policy is based on its strategic calculus and objectives of realizing Korean reunification by its own effort when the foreign troops are withdrawn from Korean soil.

The North Korean demand for negotiation with the United States to replace the Korean armistice agreement with a permanent peace treaty is based on the strategic calculus of undermining the rationale for the U.S. troop presence in the South. The U.S.-DPRK bilateral talks on pending issues, including the one on Four-Party peace talks, is conducted in such a way as to isolate South Korea and to weaken the U.S.-ROK alliance by creating a wedge between Seoul and Washington. North Korea, according to one observer, now pursues "a sort of 'encircling' strategy against the South through attempting diplomatic relations with the United States and Japan on the one hand, and the recovery of friendly relations with China and Russia on the other." (Hong, 1996, p. 337) Whether such grand strategy will work out for Pyongyang hinges upon the progress in the U.S.-DPRK bilateral talks.

The DPRK relations with China are relatively low-keyed and lack the old warmth which characterized them during the Cold War era. The DPRK relations with Russia are also cool and tepid despite Moscow's repeated efforts to improve ties with Pyongyang. This was because Moscow and Beijing decided to establish diplomatic relations with Seoul in 1990 and 1992, respectively. In September 1995 Moscow decided to scrap the 35- year long bilateral treaty of mutual assistance with Pyongyang. However, in a move to recover its influence over North Korea, Moscow has begun to restore its balanced policy toward Seoul and Pyongyang. A Russian mission, led by Deputy Premier Vitaly Ignanatenko, visited North Korea in April 1996 to promote trade and technological

cooperation between the two countries, carrying Yeltsin's personal letter to Kim Jong Il. (Vantage Point, December 1996, p. 12)

North Korea's negotiation and bargaining strategy in diplomacy, characterized by brinkmanship in the nuclear negotiation with the United States in 1992-94, derives inspiration from its Juche ideology which is, as one observer put it, sadaechui placed on its head or upside down. (Eberstadt, 1997b) Although interesting, this notion of whether Juche is the antonym of sadaechui is disputable at best because Sadaechui literally means the Choson dynasty diplomacy of "Serving the Great and belittling the Self" while Juche is the diplomatic orientation of self- reliance, not siding with either one of the allies during the Sino- Soviet disputes. More recently, the DPRK in the name of seeking Juche has come to exhibit the traditional Korea's virtue of seclusion and self-righteousness rather than the virtue of flexibility and pragmatism that modern diplomacy and statecraft would require. In North Korea today "traditionalism still triumphs," or so observes one eminent scholar. "A remarkable inwardness characterizing the society as a whole, betokening Korea's ancient label, 'the hermit kingdom,' and its contemporary amulet, juche (self-reliance}." (Scalapino, 1997: 1)

On February 12, 1997, top North Korean leader Hwang Jang Yop sought defection to South Korea at the ROK Consulate General's office in Beijing. Hwang said he wanted to defect to the South "to save the starving North Koreans and prevent a war being plotted by the North." In responding to the news of Hwang's defection, a statement from a spokesman of the North Korean Foreign Ministry noted: "Our stand is simple and clear. If he was kidnapped, we cannot tolerate it and we will take decisive countermeasures. If he sought asylum, it means that he is a renegade and therefore dismissed." Hwang was one of the powerful secretaries of the Central Committee of the ruling Korean Workers' Party, in charge of Pyongyang's foreign policy. He is the framer of Kim Il Sung's Juche ideology, and had served as president of Kimilsung University, and as chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly. There will be domestic political fallout, in terms of political purges and realignment, as well as foreign policy implications from the shock wave generated by Hwang's defection. Hopefully, the information obtained from Hwang's testimony will help build peace rather than undermine stability in the Korean peninsula.

D. What Can and Will Be Done? Korean Reunification

Reunification of North and South Korea by peaceful means is the official policy line adopted by Seoul and Pyongyang in their July 4, 1972 Joint Communique on North-South Korean dialogue. Inter-Korean dialogue and negotiation on reunification were held subsequently, on and off, on numerous occasions, but they failed to achieve a breakthrough in establishing the modus operandi in overcoming the stalemate between the two sides.

The historical "Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation Between the North and the South," signed on December 13, 1991, was not carried out successfully because of the rivalry and deep-rooted mutual distrust and antagonism between the two sides. (Kihl, 1994:133-152) The reality of the two hostile "regimes in contest" will make it difficult to realize the nationalistic aspiration of Korean reunification by peaceful means. (Kihl, 1984) In the absence of mutual trust and genuine reconciliation between the two halves, the Korean peninsula continues to remain the last frontier and the unsolved legacy of the Cold War.

On the subject of Korea's future and reunification, what can be done and whether it will be done are two separate questions. Whereas it relates to values, norms, and preferences, the question depends on facts, possibilities and probabilities.

Instead of the scenario of Korean unification by peaceful means, through the modalities of inter-Korean dialogue, negotiation, and bargaining, the more likely scenario is Korean unification by

forceful means. This will not so much repeat the Korean War of 1950-1953, which resulted from the North Korean invasion of the South, as by South Korea responding to a North Korean provocation along the DMZ or alternatively from contingencies that may result from the regime failure and collapse in the North. The scenario of Korean unification via the absorption of the North by the South, due to the policy failure of the Kim Jong Il regime domestically, is the more likely and credible in the foreseeable future.

The future prospect for Korean unification thus seems to be better than ever before. The prospects have improved reunification of Korea sometime in the near future. The precise timing and format, however, can only be conjectured. It will be done perhaps in the medium range of 3-5 years rather than in the short-term of 1-2 years or in the longer time frame of 6-10 years. The official policies and posturing of the two Korean states as well as the major powers surrounding the Korean peninsula, such as the four-party peace talks proposal and the 4 or 4+2 powers formula, will sound familiar, but the evolving balance of power in the region will influence the ultimate shape and form of Korea's future. In this sense the past will be the prologue to the future of Korea.

E. Conclusion

North Korea under Kim Jong Il is fighting for its life. What is at stake is more than the survival of the regime but the saving of the communist system itself, a system which since 1991 has been bankrupt and discredited throughout the world. The policy of building "socialism of our own style" through the Juche ideology and the Korean Workers' Party, a peculiar and unique version of Korean communism, has failed in North Korea. This is not likely to endure for long in the midst of worsening economy and the hardship due to food shortages. Without reform, the crisis management measures adopted by the Kim Jong Il regime will appear as mere tokenism.

The political formula of rejuvenating the communist system via father- son succession, following the death of the founding leader of Kim Il Sung in 1994, is not likely to succeed for a variety of reasons. The inheritance and transfer of "charisma" from father to son is not likely to succeed in modern-day North Korea. The hereditary succession was the familiar technique of the by-gone era of feudalism, not in the modern day socialism and democracy elsewhere in the world.

To be successful in political succession, Kim Jong Il's North Korea must rely on the more modern and efficient method of building legitimacy of rule by performance rather than by invoking the memory of a deceased leader. Kim Jong Il cannot hide behind the veil of secrecy, under the pretext of mourning his deceased father. He must come out in public to confront the reality of failing economy sooner or later. He must admit his responsibility rather than passing the blame to the party cadres and to his underlings.

North Korea under Kim Jong Il, or even by his own successor, will need to build its own legitimacy by solid achievement and performance in the economy, based on its own policies rather than relying on the policies of the past and the bygone era. Time is running out for North Korea to save itself.

The reason why the Kim Jong Il regime is unable to take drastic reform measures, which will eventually lead to performance-based legitimacy building, may lie in the power structure in the post-Kim Il Sung era where the military is emerging as the power base. In a recently published study, undertaken by the Hoover Institution project on North Korea, two noted scholars observed that "North Korea is ... expected to enter a period of political instability that would render Kim Jong Il little more than a figurehead" and that "North Korea is unlikely to improve its economy or stabilize its government in the next two or three years." The more likely scenario to confront the Kim Jong Il regime, the study concludes, is "an open conflict (that) may flare up between the regular armies and the security forces" and "the winner of this conflict may dictate the transition process." (Bruce

Bueno de Mesquita and Jongryn Mo, 1997, p. 27, 29).

If the preceding scenario holds true for North Korea, there will be a greater power struggle among the elites, including military factionalism and a possible coup d'etat. The immediate result of a military coup will be not only death and destruction but also the exacerbation of an already stagnant and difficult economy. Under these circumstances it is difficult to say what future holds for North Korea under the newly anointed but insecure leader, Kim Jong Il. In February 1997 Kim turned 55 years of age, which makes him no longer a young and youthful leader.

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