

Policy Forum 10-049: A New Paradigm for a New North Korea

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A New Paradigm for a New North Korea

Policy Forum, September 25th, 2010
Lee Byong-Chul

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I. Introduction

Lee Byong-Chul, senior fellow with the Institute for Peace and Cooperation (IPC) in Seoul, South Korea, writes, "With a new generation rising to power now is the time to focus on the young North Korean technocrats who are willing to reform their country in a way that can help it develop. This will give the North Koreans incentive to engage the outside world. It's time the global organizations, in particular the United Nations, should try to steer North Korea toward development and co-existence instead of waiting for it to collapse."

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II. Article by Lee Byong-Chul

-“A New Paradigm for a New North Korea”

By Lee Byong-Chul

Intelligence is, it's commonly said, inherently fallible. And the conventional wisdom is that people tend to see the world as they expect to see it and so are slow to change their minds. If this is true, the decisions made based on such intelligence analysis and mind-set should be executed with great care. Their overall judgments also must be speedy and accurate, especially in assessing an undercurrent of the presumed soon-to-be-declared power shift in North Korea.

I remember ten years or so ago, some North Korea experts at government-financed institutes proudly enjoyed likening North Korea to “a ship on fire in mid-ocean with a hold full of ammunition.” A handful of then senior colleagues of mine at the Office of the South Korean President believed strongly, and even claimed in conversations with the Clinton White-House, that the North would collapse within six to twenty-four months. Of course, it's not sure whether their assenting opinions were deliberately made to support official policy under the conservative Kim Young-sam government at the time.

Other pessimistic Korea watchers imagined that if the power succession should fail to proceed, millions of people would likely abandon their homes and move in hordes across the countryside, hastening to the northwest side of country that borders China to search for a better life there. The roads would be crammed with hungry refugees, people clinging to the steps of the trains, or crowded upon their roofs. Like the images of the Fall of Saigon, where panicked people paid whatever it took to clamber into a chopper, they imagined the scenes of exhaustion, frustrations, resentments and deprivation as the one-man ruling country could subside into anarchy in the event of an unexpected failure of the smooth transition of power. However, numerous obituaries for the Kim's family now have proven premature.

Now that the 'Dear Leader' Kim Jong-il is apparently clearing the way for the 'Brilliant Young General' Jong-un to be designated as his heir apparent, the old fumbblings and second thoughts which have so far obfuscated the predictions over the unprecedented dynastic rule to a third generation appear to be useless.

The walls at every home and in all public offices where head-shot portraits--the 'Great Leader' Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il--are closely together clung will soon host an additional photo for the Young General, presumably in his late 20s. At the same time, North Korea will be, for the time being, busy coping with headaches at home by micromanaging the economic sectors in order to legitimize its monopoly control of domestic political power.

Meanwhile, North Korea policies adopted by the South Korean governments show that the best-structured scheme of analyzing the regime usually ended with the tenure of a certain administration. These different decision makers have their own tastes for the realities of the inscrutable Kim dynasty, as clearly evidenced by the liberal and conservative governments in South Korea. In short, it is fair to say that numerous policy position papers on whether the despotic Kim regime could be overthrown were strongly influenced by the political climate of an individual government.

Under the right-wing Kim Young-sam administration (1993-1998), many North Korea analysts spent much time writing obituaries for signaling the demise of the Kim dynasty in the North. They were concerned only to see that a new North Korea would be left a workable state, preferably a democratic one, at least friendly to the South.

By contrast, there were very few cases of diagnosing the North as a time-bomb waiting to explode under the liberal Kim Dae-jung (DJ) and Roh Moo-hyun governments (1998-2008), whose progressive policies began where Kim Young-sam administration had failed. Proponents of the sunshine engagement policy were confident that the regime in Pyongyang would not wither.

The current Lee government (2008-2013) follows a pattern similar to what the right-wing Kim had tactically taken a decade earlier. In the eyes of Mr. Lee and his political cohort, the sunshine policy helped to extend the life of the failed regime in Pyongyang. Corruption and distrust already became a national disease in the North. Not surprisingly, therefore, Lee and his brain trust tend to bet on

the collapse of the unsustainable gangster-state, imagining that leaving the Kim Regimes in power would be a bigger risk to national security in the South than replacing it.

While having played the nuclear card brilliantly, Kim and his clique must eventually realize that they're getting the wrong end of the stick over the long run. The possession of nuclear weapons is not the ultimate goals of the North Korean leadership, they are a means to try and transform North Korea into a powerful and prosperous country. This means that the US and other states could make a more audacious proposal--for example the diplomatic normalization between Washington and Pyongyang—with potentially positive results.

Despite this however, the Lee government still refuses to offer olive branches to the North unless Pyongyang apologizes for the sinking in March of the South Korean naval ship, the Cheonan. As an alternative, the Lee government aim to develop a long-term co-existence with the DPRK rather than rushing to a unification matter itself without national consensus.

But I feel that the Lee government cannot afford to take such a narrow approach. If the long-stalled six-party talks resume in the not-too-distant future, the seasoned negotiators meet on an equal footing, like "distant relatives assembling to divide an inheritance." The talks are seldom easy, because the compelling issues--the North's nuclear weapons and an establishment of peace regime for keeping the stability on the peninsula--are colossal and the member states' passions run high. A new security environment demands a new paradigm. With a new generation rising to power now is the time to focus on the young North Korean technocrats who are willing to reform their country in a way that can help it develop. This will give the North Koreans incentive to engage the outside world. It's time the global organizations, in particular the United Nations, should try to steer North Korea toward development and co-existence instead of waiting for it to collapse.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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